12-1-2019

ADDRESSING THE CRITICAL STEPS OF THE BUILDING OF A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC): A CASE STUDY

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2019

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In the field of Curriculum and Instruction

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Southern Illinois University Carbondale
October 23, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Ndeye Helene Oumou Diack, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Curriculum & Instruction, presented on October 23, 2019, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ADDRESSING THE CRITICAL STEPS OF BUILDING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC): A CASE STUDY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. John McIntyre

This case study examined PLC leaders and team members during their first year setting up their PLC collaborative process. It investigated the PLC design and activities, the team members lived experiences during the setting up of the PLC, and its impact on members' interpersonal relationships and also their personal and professional growth. I collected the data by means of observations of team meetings, PLC documents analysis, an interview of an administrator, and a focus group of a team of three Caucasian American female experienced elementary teachers. The research took place in a school district at a semi-rural Midwestern town in the USA during the 2018-2019 school year. DuFour et al. (2016) model of a PLC provided the main framework for the study that took into account Situated Learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). The findings showed that despite hindrances due to the design process, accountability measures of school improvement reporting weights, and the individual PLC members' personalities, the team members I studied, unlike some other teams in the building, were doing a great collaborative work. They were driven by collective commitment to the PLC mission, values, visions and goals. They showed resiliency that is strengthened by mutual trust, mutual support, mutual respect, and protection for each other. They had a high level of dedication to improve their students' achievements by means of common formative assessment of their academic and behavioral issues, intervention plans to address issues, and a

very rigorous benchmarking of collectively designed instructional units. Vulnerability of both administrators and team members were evidenced, and the limitations of the study, recommendations for improvement, and implication for Policy Makers, as well as directions for future research are provided.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This journey towards personal achievement has been monumental and would never be possible without the help and guidance of several people, my gratitude for the people who made it happen is incommensurable.

I would like to express my everlasting gratitude to each and them. I especially would like to thank my committee chair Dr. John McIntyre and his wife Dr. Christie McIntyre without the help, support at all possible levels, and advice of whom, I would never finish my program. Dr. John, no words can ever suffice to express how grateful I am for all the countless resources and hours you spent helping me for every imaginable occasion. Dr. Christie, my mentor, with you I have shared my doubts, tears, frustrations, and hope. Thank you for understanding and upholding me so high. I will never forget your prayers holding me in your hands inside your office during the hardest times of my stay at SIUC. Thank you all for teaching me how to be resilient and for offering your expertise and insightfulness, your practical ideas and solutions to any type of solicitations without ever being judgmental. Thank you all for your willingness to work with me to improve my research study but more so for your human and humane side, when lonely and in doubt, I needed it most. You gave me the courage to keep believing in myself. I am forever grateful for your immense assistance.

I would also like to thank my other committee members who have continuously guided and supported me throughout this process. I am deeply indebted to Dr Miller for teaching me what rigor in research meant. Thank you for furthering my knowledge about academia. Dr Ernst, your continued support started in the Linguistics Department at SIUC. I keep deep memories of your help with my research papers. Dr. Thompson, working with you as a research assistant was insightful, I learned a lot about Early Childhood under your guidance. Thank you for being part

of this journey, I owe you a lot.

I would also like to show my gratitude to the School District that hosted this research and all the wonderful people there I had the opportunity to work with. Thank you for your support.

My gratitude also goes forever to the Fulbright Program and the US Department of State through the Regional English Language Office (RELO) of the US Embassy in Senegal who enabled me to further my studies in the USA. This would never happen without you.

Finally, my gratitude goes to the Faculty of the Curriculum and Instruction Department, to Dr. Rose Moroz and Debbie Blair, to Southern Illinois University Carbondale as a whole, but also to the SIUC Foundation for numerous helpful scholarships they awarded me, and the Association of Teachers of English in Senegal (ATES) and all the wonderful people I met there and learned from.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated In Memoriam to my late brother-in-law Valdiodio Ndiaye who raised me, he was more than a Dad to me. Waly, (your little name is a synonym of support, openness, protection, consideration and great African values to me). Every little step was sustained by the remembrances of all the efforts you put in my education in order to see me achieve the highest levels of learning. Please share my gratitude and pride with Samba and Martha my parents in Heaven.

I also Dedicate this work to André my husband for his understanding, love and support during all these years abroad, to Benjamin, Samuel and Roxane my children. I was away when you needed me most especially Roxane as a teenage girl. I hope you will be proud of this work at least as much as I am proud of who you all have become despite my absence. André no words suffice to show my gratitude for taking care of the children so well.

This work goes to Ndicou my sister and second mum, to her children and grandchildren for their support. Warmest thoughts to all my brothers and sisters, and all members of the Diack Family. I hope this will be an example for all my nephews and nieces. It is never too late to learn.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LISTE OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I understood that we were trying to implement the process of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in one of the junior high schools where I taught for five years when I started reading about PLCs during my doctoral studies. I had the opportunity in the early 2000's to work in the Teacher Development Program in Senegal, which has a very diverse teaching staff with different levels of education. Many teachers have Higher Education degrees and are trained in a School of Education especially those teaching at High School level, but others have only graduated from high school (elementary teachers) and a majority starts teaching without being trained. While I was working in the program as a mentor teacher and a pedagogical adviser in charge of monthly workshops, I noticed that teacher involvement in the activities was very low, and I always wondered if this was due to the different challenge teachers gathered in what we called "pedagogical cell" were facing. We thrived to build a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991), sharing best practices and upholding every struggling teacher for the benefit of student learning, but now I wonder if the culture of collaboration discussed by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos (2016) could have greatly improved our learning and teaching goals. Like in many organizations, challenges were very many and I still wonder if we did not merely jump on the bandwagon and indulge in routine monthly workshops.

Little (2012) contends that in education such appeals have rooted habits in organizational routines and professional roles and influence the "growing wave of practitioner-oriented guides, conferences, and professional development offerings." (p. 143). The most dedicated teachers who were eager to learn did make the most of the offerings from highly recognized organizations in terms of professional development such as the TESOL International Teacher Association with

its local branch dedicated to English as a Foreign Language teacher in-service development, the US Embassy Regional English Language Office and the British Council, or UNESCO who were all working in coordination with the Ministry of Education. My knowledge about PLCs has broadened ever since but my interest in improving the ways teacher in-service development is implemented for the benefit of better student learning has not been deflated.

The Research Problem

For Wenger and Snyder (2000), *communities of practice* is a term describing a group of people in a professional environment who come together to share experiences and expertise with three criteria to establish its existence: mutual engagement, jointly negotiated enterprise, and shared repertoire (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). Members establish mutual engagement when they meet and interact, their jointly negotiated enterprise aims at developing a purpose for their interaction, and the group uses shared repertoire with linguistic and extra linguistic resources (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). As Wenger and Snyder (2000) stated, the participants in a community of practice learn together focusing on challenges that directly relate to their work. But how effective has this been for the whole body of teacher learners gathered in a community of learners?

According to Levine (2010), "[a]n impressive array of scholars and reformers have called for teachers to overcome their historic isolation through the development of "teacher professional community" (p.109). The concepts of *teacher professional community* (McLaughlin &Talbert, 1993), *professional learning communities* (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005), *inquiry communities* (Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 1992a), schools as *communities of learners* (Barth, 1984), *instructional communities of practice* (Supovitz, 2002), but also similar variations on the theme of *learning communities* (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994; 2000; 2005)

all focus on teacher learning for the improvement of teaching practices and better student learning (Levine, 2010). Despite the profusion of community-oriented reforms, "community has become an obligatory appendage to every educational innovation" and "has lost its meaning" (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001, p. 492). DuFour (2004) also notes that the concept of PLC is fashionable but worries that so many have leapt onto the bandwagon, that the phrase now describes "every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education" and also fears that the concept of community is "in danger of losing all meanings" (p. 6).

Earlier, Westheimer (1998), as cited in Levine (2010), already qualified the literature on teacher community as disappointingly vague and warned about the necessity of a richer and more careful conceptualization. Levine (2010) stated that "Writing about professional learning communities, or PLCs, grows directly out of earlier writing about teacher professional communities, and cites such work; however, it offers more prescription for what schools should do." (p. 115). He complained that studies that describe PLCs seem to offer an *idealized version*. Hord and Sommers (2008) contended that despite the talk about the importance of PLCs, little attention has been focused on the research studies that have investigated what PLCs are and their real outcomes on student achievement and school improvement efforts.

A key element of successfully building collaboration is to create a network with a relaxed and welcoming tone that should move beyond mere prescription and become effective in PLC processes (Darling-Hammond, 2009; McLaughlin &Talbert, 1993; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; DuFour et al., 2016; Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 1992a; 1992b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2000; Supovitz, 2002; Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Grossman et al., 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1998). That is why my study aims to better understand PLC structures, how members thrive to build strong

professional ties, the stakeholders' preparedness, and also how successful PLCs have been in helping members navigate the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration (DuFour et al., 2016).

Significance of the Problem

After reading books and articles about PLCs (DuFour 2004; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour at al., 2016; Darling- Hammond, 2000; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Wasta, 2017; Servage, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Barnes, Camburn, Sanders, & Sebastian, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Talbert, 2010; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio, Ross & Adam, 2008; Fullan, 2007; and Willis & Templeton, 2017 among others), my curiosity stays very strong in knowing the best ways to build a culture of collaboration and what could be done to address what DuFour et al. (2008; 2010; 2016) call the *steps of building a culture of collaboration.* I would like to discover how every PLC member really feels about the PLC process design and implementation. This upholds my personal interest in studying the Professional Learning Communities process of building a *culture of collaboration*.

Another reason why this study is significant for me relates to my challenging experience as a novice in-service teacher. I did not benefit from clinical supervision. I noticed a lack of richness in the teacher development program activities that often did not meet all participants' needs (Newman, Samimy, & Romstedt, 2010) and also lacked collegiality at school and trustworthiness in the mentors or workshop leaders (Saito, Hendayana, Imansyah, Isamu, & Hideharu, 2006). There seemed to be a feeling of a waste of time and an increase in teacher and mentor workload which remains common in the literature (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012). Thus, I believe that there is a need for more research on teacher development, stakeholders' preparedness, and program implementation and evaluation to be uncovered by studying the lived

experiences of PLC members as they build a culture of collaboration during the PLC process.

Audiences That will Profit from the Study.

I therefore believe that the audience that will profit from my study will be the PLC community members that comprise the district and school leaders, veteran and novice teachers evolving in the PLC community, as well as students as a consequence of a better collaboration of team members in working towards building a collaborative culture and collective responsibility in order to ensure that all students learn at all levels (DuFour et al., 2016). I also include mentor teachers, student teachers posted in schools with successful (or not) PLCs, principals, and pedagogical advisers as well as all education officials. In addition, this study will first benefit me as a researcher because I might find answers to questions I have been asking myself for years. I finally will bring a great contribution to the literature about the PLCs and help improve how PLC members address the critical issues of building a culture of collaboration and thus improve acceptance of shared leadership, responsibility and mutual accountability.

Past Research on the Problem

As stated earlier, the literature on teacher professional development mentions challenges such as a lack of clinical supervision (Vandyck et al., 2012) issues of funding (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015), lack of richness in the activities that do not often meet participants needs (Newman et al., 2010), but also the lack of collegiality at school (Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 1992a; 1992b; Darling-Hammond, 2009; DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2005; 2008; 2016; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2000) or little trustworthiness in the mentors or workshop leaders which leads to a general feeling of waste of time and increase of workload for teachers (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012).

Research reveals five themes emerging in relation to the organization and collaboration

among teachers when they collaborate in educational reform networks or collaborative communities: a) purpose and direction, b) building collaboration, consensus, and commitment, c) activities and relationships as important building blocks, d) leadership, and e) dealing with funding problems (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996, cited in Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). Schmoker (2006) stated that to respond to the No Child Left Behind Act's demand for school reform, PLCs have offered school leaders one of the most commonly accepted reform approaches for the development of site-based professional learning communities (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Darling-Hammond (2009) and many others advocated for the necessity of building a successful culture of collaboration inside teacher learning networks where all members embrace each other as a whole for better student learning with a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere allegedly possible in PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; 2016; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Cochran- Smith & Lytle, 1992a; 1992b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2000; Supovitz, 2002; Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Grossman et al., 2000; and Lave & Wenger, 1998).

Literature claims that PLCs have come to the forefront of school reform efforts to help educational staff address the challenges of increasing student achievement following US federal and state accountability policies (Sergiovanni, 1994; Hord, 1997; Senge et al., 2000; Fullan, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; DuFour et al., 2008). School reforms and accountability measures followed the 1983 report, A Nation at Risk, indicating the failure of US public schools with the latter phase of the effective school movement beginning to focus on school improvement through change models (DuFour, 2004; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Schmoker, 2006; and DuFour & Eaker, 1998). However, school reforms have not been always successful and, according to DuFour and Eaker (1998), there are five major

reasons why the school effectiveness reform effort failed its ambitious goals:(a) the complex reform task, (b) the often misguided focus of the reform efforts, (c) reform emphasis that was on improvement, but did not have a vision of a measurable outcome, (d) a general lack of perseverance and commitment in the efforts, and finally (e) the inability to address the change process (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Such issues still exist in current attempts at reforming schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2004). Understanding that school reform must have a comprehensive design and include deep commitment from local stakeholders is of a paramount importance according to Hord (1997) who acknowledged that school leaders are too often looking unsuccessfully for short cuts with disappointing results (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008; 2016) because NCLB accountability measures go with what Cormier and Olivier (2009) called *general endorsement of higher accountability*. Unfortunately, school's improvement failure is due partly to a lack of understanding of the basic concepts and the lack of commitment of stakeholders to a meaningful culturally school embedded change (DuFour et al., 2010; 2016). According to Cormier and Olivier (2009), the literature referred to stakeholders in PLCs by including principals, faculty members and staff, students, as well as parents, the school district, and the public community (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; DuFour et al, 2008). Cormier and Olivier (2009) stated that the references to stakeholders should be limited to the roles and influences of the school principal and teachers on the PLC because of the limited empirical studies offered by the literature about the impact non-certificated stakeholders such as parents and community members have had on school site-based PLCs.

Purpose of the Study

My proposed study seeks to investigate how members address the critical steps of the building a culture of collaboration in a Professional Learning Community. DuFour et al. (2016)

explained the importance of a collaborative team in the school improvement process because collaboration does not lead to improved results if the people are not focused on the PLC's right work. They cautioned about the happenings when colleagues willingly discuss issues but never implement the discussion outcomes once back in their classrooms, because collaboration is a systematic process and teachers work interdependently as a team to impact their teaching practices, improve students' achievements. PLC members are expected to work and learn together to build shared knowledge on how to better achieve goals and meet the needs of the students they serve (Windschitl, 2002; Tanner et al., 2017; Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Vescio et al., 2006; Barnes et al., 2010; Lomos et al., 2011).

I propose a purely Qualitative Methods approach in order to collect and analyze the data which includes PLC members, their PLC structures, design, activities and the process implementation. I will use a focus group interview of PLC team members and an interview of PLC leaders. I will also use observation fieldnotes and document analysis with activity reports, activity plans and attendance sheets as well as minutes of meetings to weigh PLC members' dispositions, attitudes and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1966; 1997) via situated learning during their PLC recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research for better student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Collecting both audio and visual qualitative data can allow me to increase credibility (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011), to better understand the findings because they will confirm or disconfirm each other and redirect the issue at stake (Bryman, 2006).

Proposed Sample

For this study, I planned to include a purposeful sample composed of novice and veteran teachers, including those identified as teacher leaders, as well as administrative leaders within a

school district's Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the Mideastern USA. I chose purposeful sampling because it is appropriate for a purely qualitative study using focus groups for team members from the Professional Learning Community and individual interviews for the identified leaders. Furthermore, this study will take place in their natural setting, school, where the PLC team members teach (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). I will seek to obtain the list of the individual members or teachers of the entire accessible population by contacting the administrative leaders of the school district as well as PLC leaders. I will contact the administrators to obtain permission to access the list of all PLC members and ask teachers and leaders to be participants in my study. I then will be able to describe the lived experiences of the different groups as well as how they interact with each other and will be able to examine relationships between members of the PLC. My target population is not generalizable because cultural norms are different from one geographical location to the other and a culture is meaningful inside its geographical location. But the thick description I intend to use will help other researchers make connections with their own population.

Research Questions

My data collection and analysis methodology to study PLC members' community during the critical steps of building a strong culture of collaboration in order to achieve better student results, was designed to lead to the answers to the following questions:

1. How is Professional Learning Community (PLC) at SamaSchool designed?
2. What are teachers' experiences during the planning, implementation and assessment of PLC activities?
3. How does the design of the PLC impact teachers' motivation, interpersonal relationships, and personal and professional growth?

These questions are appropriate because they align with the design of a Phenomenological Case Study and the worldview of Social Constructivism (Creswell, 2014) in order to faithfully report the stories of PLC members as they thrive to build a shared knowledge, responsibility, and mutual accountability in achieving better student results at all levels, and to describe the essence of their lived experience. Three main themes summarized the views discussed in the literature: a real need for specialized professional development, the importance of collaboration between the different stakeholders especially key persons' support, and issues of funding and program design. My research questions try to investigate possible gaps, which were not well addressed and investigate them in a case study in order to see how the prescriptive advice of DuFour et al. (2008; 2010; and 2016) actually helps during the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration in the PLC process. All sources stated the awareness of all participants about the importance of mutual learning, but I anticipate that the qualitative data will allow me to discover such things as team members' relationships and support abilities, responsibility sharing and endorsement, teacher involvement, activity frequency et effectiveness, with their meanings as well as many other qualitatively researchable data. This also aligns with the paradigm of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Wenger & Snyder, 2000) I intend to use to answer my research questions.

Philosophical and Theoretical Framework

I would like to propose a qualitative Phenomenological Case-Study under the Social Constructivist Worldview. Creswell (2014), Teddlie and Tashakori (2009) agreed with Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) that " the understanding or meaning of phenomena, formed through the participants and their subjective views, makes up this Worldview" of Constructivism (p. 40). I revisited Cognitive Constructivism, and Social Constructivism in order to better choose a

framework for my study coupling this with DuFour et al. (2016) model of a PLC to compare and contrast my findings with. I will use their rating scale on pages 69-70 entitled "Critical Issues for Team Consideration" to check how the PLC I studied was successful in addressing the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration.

Constructivism views learning as inevitably affected by the learner's context as well as his beliefs and attitudes (Vygotsky, 1978; Windschitl, 2002). Learning results from individual mental construction: the learner acquires new knowledge by matching new information against given information and by establishing meaningful connections. I believe that this aligns with what DuFour et al. (2016) advised as a better way of learning in a PLC with the use of data-driven learning and Dewey (1916; 1938) who believed that new knowledge can only emerge from meaningful experiences embedded in a social context (here a PLC) where learners can take part in manipulating materials (student data, learning/teaching resources); They form a *community of learners* (Lave & Wenger, 1991 called it *community of practice* in the Situated Cognition Theory) constructing a common knowledge collaboratively. DuFour et al. (2016) believe that "[t]he very reason for any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone" (p. 75). This is a great example of Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that lies in the difference between what an individual can accomplish alone and the potential development through problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers (other PLC members). DuFour et al. (2016) stressed the importance of the joint action of PLC members in achieving productivity, high performance and innovation interdependently. They believed that the effectiveness of the PLC depends on the coordinated and focused effort of all team members, and the inability to work interdependently will hinder progress and group cohesion since

knowledge is embedded in the educational context in which it is used with authentic tasks in meaningful and realistic school settings. PLC members learn in situated cognition theory (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Caldwell, 2012; and Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Collaboration is of a paramount importance in the work of a PLC, so DuFour et al. (2016) and many other educational researchers contended that merely organizing people into teams does not guarantee school improvement and better student learning (Senge et al., 1994; Edmonson, 2013; Blanchard, 2007, and Fulton & Britton, 2011, all cited in DuFour et al., 2016). On the contrary, "[s]teps must be taken to ensure that those team members engage in collaboration on the issues that most impact student learning. (p.75). It is therefore widely accepted in educational research that a culture of collaboration is tightly linked to school improvement, and teachers working collaborative is thus compulsory if the goals of a PLC remain better student achievement. However, issues related to Social Constructivism affect PLC work and DuFour et al. (2016) are aware of this while describing the step-by-step process by which PLC members go through while building a collaborative culture.

The most debated issue that should be addressed according to research is building time to collaborate. Some PLC leaders oppose providing team members with the time to collaborate because they believe that it is unproductive time that could be spent teaching. Hopefully research from both education and organizational development advocate for building time for reflection and dialogue throughout the PLC process in order to create a culture of continuous improvement through recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve effective teacher, and consequently better student learning (Fullan, 2001; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; 2016; and Darling-Hammond, 1996; Windschitl, 2002). But Fullan (2001) cautioned that collaborative culture stay focused on the right things if they want to stay powerful and not

waste their time in unproductive discussions. This can be avoided by following DuFour et al.'s (2016) advice to create norms inside the PLC all team members have to commit to because norms help PLC members clarify their expectation by promoting open dialogue, shared leadership, and responsibility which are key concepts in Social Constructivism.

According to DuFour et al. (2016), when building a culture of collaboration, there are important tips high performing teams have to follow in order to move forward. They need to create meaningful teams on the basis of shared responsibility, create time for collaboration and use it in an effective way, and develop widely shared leadership among team members by welcoming and valuing multiple perspectives. They also urge PLC team members to build shared knowledge when learning together during the collaborative process in order to make decisions on the basis of evidences.

DuFour et al. (2016) believed that the most effective way to help team members build their capacity during the PLC process is to provide them with essential resources they need for team success such as supporting research, templates, exemplars and worksheets. Leaders like in all constructivist organizations act as facilitators who continually assess their teams' progress, but also self-evaluate in order to respond quickly when needed. Van Lare and Brazer (2013) contended that their conceptual framework can be used as a practical instrument school and district leaders utilize to assess their PLCs functioning within the established structure because of two weaknesses they found in the current theory base for empirical work on PLCs: there is no clear, "agreed-upon theoretical model used to analyze teacher learning in the PLC setting [this] creates a situation in which the literature informing the creation and development of PLCs runs the risk of neglecting the movement's central purpose: teacher learning" (p. 375). The second weakness Van Lare and Brazer (2013) found was that "PLCs tend to be studied in isolation, with

little attention to the context within which they exist". (p. 375). Thus, PLC leaders should lead by example, staying focused on establishing and honoring the team commitments and targeting collective goals. PLC leaders in a school or district wide should create procedures that ensure cross-team collaboration to expand the knowledge base to all teams by linking them with relevant resources inside the school or across schools.

To keep PLC teams motivated and aware of their personal and collective achievement, DuFour et al. (2016) advocated for leaders to celebrate teams' success by grasping every opportunity to acknowledge their efforts and accomplishments. Consideration of all these concepts and checking them against the precepts of Social Constructivism comfort me in the idea that I have the best framework for studying PLC members' community during the critical steps of building a strong culture of collaboration in order to achieve better student results. It will most suitably inform my view of how the PLCs should be designed to improve the relationships of team members during the process of building a collaborative process, teachers' dispositions, attitudes and self-efficacy via situated learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Windschitl, 2002; Brown et al., 1989; Lave 1998; Wenger, Lave & Wenger, 1991: Bandura, 1966; 1997). Discussions and openness to other perspectives and decentering will help leaders and members navigate the process smoothly and avoid unfruitful talk and frustration. Bearing this in mind will allow me to combine the different data sources of my qualitative study to answer my research questions.

Definition of Terms

*Professional Learning Community***:** According to DuFour et al. (2010, 2016), "Professional Learning Communities is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve." (p. 10) They add that "PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved

learning is for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators" (p. 10).

Collaborative Culture: For DuFour et al. (2016) "educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of all student" (p. 11). To build such culture in a PLC the team members work interdependently to achieve common goals and are held mutually accountable.

SMART Goals: PLC goals should be **S**trategic and specific (aligned with the organization's goals), Measurable, Attainable, Result-oriented and Time bound (SMART) according to O'Neil Conzemius, Commodore and Pulsfus (2006).

Stakeholders: For Cormier and Olivier (2009) the literature refers to *stakeholders* in the context of PLCs by including principals, faculty members and staff, students, parents, the school district, and the public community. But Cormier and Olivier (2009) limit their references to stakeholders in a PLC to the school principal and teachers because of the limited empirical studies in the literature about the impact of parents and community members have had on school site-based PLCs. I also limit my definition of the stakeholders to the PLC leaders, PLC team members, school and district administration and the students for the sake of feasibility because of time and resource constraints.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large body of literature identified that PLCs have come to the forefront of school reform efforts to help educational staff address the challenges of increasing student achievement following US federal and state accountability policies (Hord, 1997; Senge et al., 2000; Fullan, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; DuFour et al., 2008; Stoll et al, 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). However, Levine (2010) stated that "[t]hose who describe PLCs seem to offer an idealized version of a professional learning community" (p. 115) because for them the first sketch of a PLC in action reveals a scenario created by DuFour and Eaker (1998) rather than an actual case. School reforms and accountability measures indicating the failure of US public schools with the phase of the effective school movement begin to focus on school improvement through change models (DuFour, 2004; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Schmoker, 2006; and DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

As stated earlier, school reforms have not been always successful as DuFour and Eaker (1998) pinpointed five major reasons why school effectiveness reform efforts failed their ambitious goals (Cormier & Olivier, 2009):

> The reasons included (a) the complexity of the reform task, (b) the focus of the reform efforts were often misguided, (c) reform emphasis was on improvement, but lacked a vision of a measurable outcome, (d) a general lack of perseverance and commitment, and (e) the inability to address the change process. (p. 12).

Such issues still exist in current attempts at reforming schools, according to DuFour and Eaker (1998) and DuFour (2004). According to Hord (1997), understanding that school reform must have a comprehensive design and include deep commitment from local stakeholders is of a

paramount importance. He acknowledges that school leaders are often looking unsuccessfully for short cuts with disappointing results (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; and 2016) because the NCLB accountability measures go with a general endorsement of higher accountability (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Unfortunately, school improvement failure is due partly to a lack of understanding of the basic concepts but also to the lack of commitment of stakeholders to a meaningful culturally school embedded change (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2008).

Cormier and Olivier (2009) described key characteristics of successful PLCs as defined by Hord (1997; 2004) in school settings, considering that nowadays PLCs are a viable process to consider in addressing school improvement needs.

> The five dimensions identified by Hord included (a) shared beliefs, values, and visions; (b) shared and supportive leadership, (c) collective learning and its application, (d) supportive conditions, and (e) shared personal practice. (p. 54)

These five dimensions were often referenced in other theoretical frameworks as an established standard for describing PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Moller & Pankake, 2006). Cormier & Olivier (2009) researched the roles principals and teachers play in the PLCs by extensively examining contemporary studies and theoretical frameworks involving PLCs. In Cormier and Olivier's (2009) literature review, studies on PLCs generally illustrated successful results in affecting student achievement such as in the studies of Andrews and Lewis (2002), Stoll et al. (2006), and DuFour and Eaker (1998). However, they found that the literature suggests varied and often misunderstood perceptions and applications of PLCs in the K-12 school setting (Hord & Sommers, 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2016; and Windschitl, 2002 also noted the same issues). The growing popularity of PLCs is very interesting

to observe as they are currently considered as the top idea for improving schools, according to DuFour et al. (2008) and DuFour et al. (2016). They publish books and videos on PLCs with two main goals in mind: The first goal is "to persuade educators of the most promising strategy for meeting the challenge of helping all students learn at a high level is to develop their capacity to function as a professional learning community." The second one is "to offer specific strategies and structures to help them transform their own school and district in PLCs" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 9).

The term PLC is described in varied ways (Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; and DuFour et al., 2016), and in every imaginable combination (DuFour, 2004b) as there are several different models of PLCs that exist such as the Hord, DuFour and Senge models. A PLC combines individuals with an interest in education in a group that is generally a team of grade-level teachers, a school committee, a large school district or a high school department. It can also team people from the same national professional organization, or a state department of education. DuFour (2004 b) noted: "the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning" (p.1). DuFour et al. (2008) and DuFour et al. (2016) contended, " the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meanings" (p.10). They state this as an obstacle to well implemented PLC processes because of this lack of clarity in the PLC definition. Lomos et al. (2010) think that despite its great momentum in the last decades the PLC concept has faced both conceptual and methodological challenges because no universal definition has been agreed upon and its operationalization is different across multiple empirical studies. Cormier and Olivier (2009) cautioned that the misuse or misconceptions regarding the personal commitment and

investment of educational leaders may yield unsuccessful efforts for implementation, sustainability, and desired outcome in PLCs may prove to be costly and may deter future efforts for innovative school reform (Datnow, 2005; Tarnoczi, 2006; Timperly & Robinson, 2000, cited in Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Furthermore, Cormier and Olivier (2009) found that despite that positive attitude towards PLCs, high schools have not been very successful in laying the foundation of a PLC and in implementing the goals, so this domain deserves further study within the PLC research (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004).

Definition of a PLC

What a PLC is not.

Since the 1990s, PLCs are almost omnipresent in the world of primary and secondary schools (DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; 2016). After more than two decades of experience in the implementation of PLC programs, strong evidence now exists that implementing data-driven PLCs in particular, has positive effects on student achievement (Tanner et al., 2017; Marsh, 2010; Mokhtari & Edwards, 2009; Berry et al., 2005; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al. 2010; DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan, 2002). For example, Berry et al. (2005) found a 50% to 80% student performance improvement. However, in spite of this evidence of PLC efficacy, not every PLC yields benefits to students, faculty and the school community and a variety of reason may explain why PLCs can be unsuccessful for team collaboration and student achievement. DuFour et al. (2016) relate instances in which educators assume a PLC is a program or other instances in which it is a meeting, an occasional event when colleagues meet to complete a task, and others still think they are members of a PLC because they discuss topics based on common readings. So, DuFour et al. (2016) believe it is primordial to clarify that "[t]he PLC is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by

anyone other than the staff itself" (p. 10), so they start by stating what a PLC " is not" before giving their own definition of what "it is".

Definitions of a PLC.

According to these researchers, a PLC process is not a program, it is much more than a meeting, it is much more than a book club because even though a collective study and discussion of the readings of a book is part of the crucial elements of the PLC process, it requires the team members to "act on the new information". For DuFour et al. (2016) it is very important to understand the "ongoing [..] continuous, never ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals in it" (p. 10). As PLCs develop over time, researchers and scholars came up with their own definitions.

Hord (1997) conceptualized PLCs in schools where teachers and staff steadfastly follow these five dimensions. These five dimension are supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application of learning; supportive conditions, and finally shared personal practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) suggested that PLCs increase teachers' formal knowledge combined with practical knowledge. They identify three distinct prominent conceptions of teacher learning. The first conception is referred to as "knowledge-for-practice" or formal knowledge and theory taught by university researchers for teachers to use in order to improve practice. The next conception of teacher learning is "knowledge-in-practice" the most essential knowledge for teaching also called practical knowledge embedded in practice and reflective teaching. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) assumed that "teachers learn when they have opportunities to probe the knowledge embedded in the work of expert teachers and/or to deepen their own knowledge and expertise as makers of wise judgments and designers of rich

learning interactions in the classroom." (p. 250). Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) third conception of teacher learning involves "knowledge-of-practice". But they contended that knowledge-of-practice is unlike the first two conceptions and cannot be understood in terms of a universe of knowledge dividing formal knowledge from practical knowledge (Tanner et al., 2017).

> Rather, it is assumed that the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation. (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, p.250)

Moreover, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) think that it is very important to reflect deeper on teachers' performance connections with others outside classrooms as well as to make sure teachers perform and act well in their classrooms with the evaluation and measurement of students' results and teacher professional learning. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) define PLC as an association whereby: "[T]eachers work collaboratively to reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes" (p. 4).

According to Servage (2008), the concept of a PLC is perhaps most ubiquitously understood at present within the framework proposed by DuFour and Eaker (1998) and it has captured North American educators' collective imagination with a promise to alter fundamentally teaching, learning, and the bureaucracy and individualism that used to be pervasive in so many schools. For Servage (2008), the PLC model is called upon to benefit collective work and shared responsibility, but also to meet relationship needs in powerful ways.

She however wonders what sort of change (reformation or transformation) can be advanced with the PLC model. She contends that

> presently, professional learning communities focus their efforts on the means of teaching and not its ends. In our present achievement- and accountability-oriented political climate, the *learning* in a professional learning community is understood, for the most part, as best practices or a body of pedagogical, technical expertise that in theory will guarantee positive academic outcomes for students. (p. 65)

But for Servage (2008) studying best practices is valuable and useful as a form of teacher learning, but it is incomplete as a representation of collaborative processes; therefore it is not transformative because while improved pedagogical skills undoubtedly impact positively, focusing exclusively on these skills does not promote the required critical reflection for understanding PLCs and schools as complex social and political entities. Servage (2008) believes that transformation cannot occur if the school is unable to collectively imagine other possibilities for itself; hence the importance of considering the "extent to which teachers themselves must undergo transformation, if substantive and sustainable change will occur" (p. 67). For her transformative learning theory impacts significant personal and professional growth, which is ideally supported by critical friends in a psychologically safe group setting. She considered this because it is a means to more fully consider the possibilities and limits of the change that can be expected from collaborative learning, and this helps for a better understanding of why the establishment of a PLC is more challenging than anticipated. Hollins et al. (2004) stressed the importance of a facilitator helping teachers stay focused on the PLC goal of improving African American students' literacy during all group meetings. Hollins et al. (2004) do believe that "[l]*earning to teach* is a continuous process that requires reflection on one's own practice,

dialogue and collaboration with colleagues, and the acquisition and production of new knowledge concerning the multidimensional process of teaching" p. (247), and Sergiovanni (2000) believes that "developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school" (p. 139). Cormier and Olivier (2009), Sacks (2017) as well as Eaker et al. (2002), and Hord (2004) noticed that the terms shared, collaborative, and collective are normally associated with leadership and learning in PLCs when considering the different descriptions of a PLC. This leads to the definition DuFour et al. (2010) and DuFour et al. (2016) give to a PLC.

DuFour et al.(2016) definition of a PLC.

According to them, PLC is in the heart of teacher professional development and school improvement but all in all it is all about student learning improvement. DuFour et al. (2008) and DuFour et al. (2010; 2016) define a PLC as *"an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve"* (2016, p.10). Astuto et al. (1993, cited in Saï & Siraj, 2015) named the process of the teachers getting together to share knowledge and improve their teaching practice as Professional Community of Learners (PCL). It's Hord (1997) who later coined the practice as Professional Learning Communities (PLC), a focal point of education discussions (Saï & Siraj, 2015). For Hord (1997) the first characteristic of a PLC is shared beliefs, vision, and values, and in the process of improvement, the key point is a shared mind, universal goals, and a same central value system that sustains learning. The main belief must be learned by students and main values are put forth to encourage teachers to share their visions for the improvement of student learning (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). As for Senge (1990), he focused on *systems thinking* in a learning organization in his book "The Fifth Discipline." His focus was on engaging teachers in teams to create and develop a shared vision and shared knowledge to

improve their teaching. “The Fifth Discipline” thus became a driving force in the USA, Canada and Western European school districts and educational settings because of the new lens on the development of PLCs (Saï & Siraj, 2015).

Senge et al. (1990) offer a dynamic set of structures in the “Five Disciplines”: *personal mastery*, *systems thinking*, *mental models*, *shared vision*, and *team learning*. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) wrote that each of these five disciplines includes principles able to guide successful learning, mastery practice, and testing in people’s lives and work. However, Caldwell (2012) believes that “Senge’s learning organization falters as a theory of organizational learning precisely because it is intrinsically a theory of leadership that narrows rather than expands the critical exploration of agency, learning and change in organizations” (p. 52). Eaker et al. (2002) described leadership in a PLC as administrators extending their leadership positions to include teachers holding important delegated leadership positions. For Caldwell (2012), there are many limitations in Senge’s system-based concept of organizational learning as a form of distributed leadership. It is a profound failure of ‘system thinking’ in the way it explored *agency* and *change* in relation to practice because in varieties of systems theory, ‘agency’ is invariably a subordinate category in structural explanations of behavioral change, or it is excluded altogether in the quest to realize a more rigorous and universal model of the properties of social systems. That’s why Caldwell (2012) asserts that in “Senge’s restricted reading of ‘system thinking’ structure defines agency and change, as well as the “second order roles of change agents” he adds that there is a paradox. Caldwell (2012) questions how change emerges, who or what initiates change, and what practices or processes define organizational learning and change? Other questions Caldwell (2012) asks were related to the evolvement and adaptations of systems.

In Senge’s five disciplines, *Systems thinking* refers to the way we see interrelationship

links, and connections existing in things and represents the conceptual cornerstone (Saï & Siraj, 2015). As stated earlier in this literature review, for Hord (2004) there are five dimensions identified but put together these dimensions should be visualized as interdependent and providing a dynamic infrastructure to the school's PLC.

For a successful PLC to exist, the focus should be on learning rather than on teaching, teams should work collaboratively, and each team member should hold him(her)self-accountable for the team's results (Hord, 1997; Fullan, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Senge et al., 2000; DuFour, 2004b; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; & 2016). The model of PLC has reached the critical juncture where the initial enthusiasm of school reforms is replaced by confusion about the fundamental concepts of the initiative that is followed by inevitable issues of implementation (Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Lomos et al., 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008; Sims & Penny, 2014; Supovitz, 2002; Hargreaves, 2007; DuFour, 2002; DuFour, 2004b; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; & 2016; Sacks, 2017; Tanner et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a forceful conclusion that like for many school reforms that failed to bring about the desired results, there might be an abandonment of the reform, and a now familiar cycle of a new search for the next promising initiative might be launched. However, the educational community leaders have gained a huge body of knowledge about PLCs, but a gap still exists between how they are perceived and the reality in many schools (DuFour et al., 2008). Dufour (2004b) asserts that "[t]he movement to develop professional learning communities can avoid this cycle, but only if educators reflect critically on the concept's merits." (p. 1). He based his assumption on "*big ideas"* that uphold the core principals of PLCs guiding schools' efforts to sustain the model of PLC until it becomes strongly embedded in the culture of the school based on DuFour et al.'s

(2016) ‘Big Ideas’.

The Three Big Ideas of a PLC

According to DuFour (2004b), DuFour et al. (2008; 2010; & 2016), the PLC ‘big ideas’ revolve around: 1. a *focus on learning*, 2. a *collaborative culture, and collective responsibility*, and 3. a *results orientation*. Let us consider each of these big ideas to better understand what they are and how they are endorsed by PLC leaders and team members in order to better implement the vision, mission, values and goals of the PLC.

1. A Focus on Learning

According to DuFour et al. (2016), a focus on learning is the first and most important of the three big ideas that drive the work of a PLC because “*the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at all levels”* (p. 11, italics in original). The very essence of a learning community is the focus on and commitment to the learning of each and every student. Therefore, educators within a school wide or district wide PLC are dedicated to high levels of learning for all students as the reason for their organization’s existence and the fundamental responsibility of the PLC team members. This translates in members’ collective commitment that indicates each individual member’s duties in order to make such an organization happen by using result oriented goals to mark the PLC progress (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Servage, 2008; Fullan, 2007; DuFour, 2004b; Lomos et al., 2011). Among the important duties, are not only team members clarifying exactly what students must learn, but also that they should monitor all students’ learning and provide systematic intervention both in a timely manner in order to make sure all students receive additional time and support when they need it, and or when they have already mastered the content and learning outcomes. Therefore, in order to strengthen their potentials for helping all students acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of

each unit, course, or grade level, adult members in that PLC should be continuously learning as a team in a job-embedded structure that is an integral part of their routine practices (Supovitz, 2013; Servage, 2008; Fullan, 2007; DuFour, 2004b; Sacks, 2017; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). Hargreaves (2010) stated "[T]eachers can also only really learn once they get outside their own classrooms and connect with other teachers: when they can see beyond the immediate world that surrounds them" (p.1). That is how they build the third big idea of a PLC: not only a strong culture of collaboration but also one of collective responsibility of successes and failure of the PLC.

2. A Collaborative Culture, and Collective Responsibility

For DuFour et al. (2016), another big idea driving the work of a PLC is to make sure students learn at the highest levels, "*educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of all student*" (p. 11, italics in original). For them collaborative work is not optional. Rather, it is 'an expectation and a requirement of the employment'. Therefore, the collaborative teams of educators whose members work interdependently to achieve common educational goals constitute the fundamental structure of a PLC, the engine that drives the building block of the educational organization. The members are mutually accountable of the successes of the common goals directly linked to the purpose of learning for all (Fullan, 2007; Vescio et al. 2008; Hollins et al., 2004; Tanner et al., 2017; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Lomos et al., 2011). But DuFour et al. (2016) believe that "collaboration in the PLC is a means to an end, not the end itself" (p. 12) to explain the importance of a collaborative team in the school improvement process, because collaboration does not lead to improved results if the people are not focused on the PLC's *right work*. What happens in many schools where colleagues are willing to discuss topics of interest but never implement them inside their

classroom should not happen in a PLC because collaboration is a systematic process and teachers work interdependently as a team to impact their teaching practices in ways that improve the results for all their students, their team, and their school. PLC members are therefore expected to work and learn together to build shared knowledge on how to better achieve goals and to meet the needs of the students they serve to align with the third big idea (Tanner et al., 2017; Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Vescio et al., 2006; Barnes et al., 2010; Lomos et al., 2011). This third big idea is supported by the use of data to drive the work of the PLC.

3. A Results Orientation

Educators in a PLC focus on results as evidence of their effectiveness in helping all their students. That is the third big idea driving the work of a PLC or a need for a result orientation. In DuFour (2002) the principal confesses what he believes was a mistake in his leadership: the pursuit of the *wrong question*:

> I had devoted countless hours each school year to those efforts—I had been focusing on the wrong questions. I had focused on the questions, what are the teachers teaching? and how can I help them to teach it more effectively? Instead, my efforts should have been driven by the questions, to what extent are the students learning the intended outcomes of each course? and what steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time and support they need to improve learning? (p. 2)

Using the results for formative assessment, teams utilize the evidence to inform their professional practice and respond with the right intervention or enrichment to students who need it. For DuFour et al. (2016), "[m]embers of a PLC recognize that all of their efforts must ultimately be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions" (p.12) and this is

corroborated by Senge et al. (1994) who pinpoint the focus on the production of dramatically improved results. This leads to the cyclical process of a PLC in which educators create the conditions for perpetual learning. Participation in the process is not reserved to the PLC leaders but it is the responsibility of each and every member of the organization and drives the so called "shared responsibility" (DuFour, 2004b; Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Lomos et al., 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Sacks, 2017; Vescio et al., 2008; Supovitz, 2002; Supovitz, 2013; Hargreaves, 2007; Tanner et al., 2017). It is of a paramount importance for PLC members to use the results of formative assessments to identify students who are lagging behind and to provide the needed support in an atmosphere of pure shared collegiality inside a culture of collaboration. That culture of collaboration will be the main focus of this study.

A Collaborative Culture and Collective Responsibility

DuFour et al. (2016) define a PLC as an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve and they believe that the "process empowers educators to make important decisions and encourages their creativity and innovation in the pursuit of improving student and adult learning" (p.13). Among the important decisions educators make we can see decisions about 'what to teach', 'the sequencing and pacing of the content', 'the assessments used to monitor student learning', 'the criteria used in assessing the quality of student work', 'the norms for their team' and, finally, 'the goals for their team'.

PLC team members' primary responsibility is the analysis of the evidence of student learning and the development of strategies for improvements and each and every teacher has the freedom to use instructional strategies he or she believes might be the most effective in helping

students learn (Hollins et al., 2004). This possibility of allowing teachers that authority to make these important decisions relates to what DuFour et al. (2016) called the "*loose"* aspects of the PLC process. Thus, through an increased role in collaboration and inclusion of leadership, teachers develop a greater appreciation for the professional learning community (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; DuFour, 2004b; Fullan, 2010; Tanner et al., 2017; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Supovitz, 2013). On the contrary Dufour et al. (2016) also identified "tight" elements of the PLC process that take place at the same time. These "tight" elements according to them are "nondiscretionary and everyone in the school is required to adhere to those elements" (p. 13). These tight elements need great attention when building a collaborative team (Andrews & Lewis, 2002).

1. *Tight elements in a PLC*.

According to DuFour et al. (2016) there are six tight elements in a PLC.

1. Educators collaboratively, rather than in isolation, take collective responsibility for student learning and clarify the commitment they make to each other about how they will work together.
2. The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable.
3. The team establishes a guaranteed and viable curriculum unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.
4. The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning.

5. The school has created a system of interventions and extensions to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic, and students who demonstrate proficiency can extend their learning.

6. The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practice of its members. (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 14)

These tight elements of the PLC process deserve a lot of attention because of the debates that arose regarding how loose and tight elements of a PLC process should be implemented and if it should be top-down, led by the administration or if it should be bottom-up and left to the discretion of individuals or to the team of teachers. DuFour et al. (2016) assert that this question has been resolved and it should neither be bottom-up nor top-down because according to them neither works because the top-down does not yield the deep understanding and commitment to improvement initiative necessary to its sustainability. As for the bottom-up approach they compare to the laissez-faire, it eliminates the pressure to change and is associated to an increase in student struggle (Marzano & Watters, 2009). On the contrary, to be a highly performing one, a PLC should empower the teams to make important decisions while demanding them to adhere to the core elements when engaging educators in the PLC process (Sacks, 2017; Fullan, 2007; Supovitz, 2013; Tanner et al., 2017; Servage, 2008; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; DuFour et al., 2008, DuFour & Fullan, 2013; DuFour et al., 2016). This simultaneously tight and loose culture will drive our search of how to address the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility in a PLC.

According to DuFour et al. (2016), the tight elements in a PLC listed above when they are right and coupled with a clear communication of what is tight in a consistent and unequivocal

way, will be the keys to building a PLC culture that is simultaneously loose and tight. Hence the importance of clear communication for leaders of any team and between members of the team who should know that to be effective communicators leaders should understand the importance of clear communication. Collins (2001) and Pfeffer & Sutton (2000), cited in DuFour et al. (2016), asserted that "[p]owerful communication is simple and succinct, driven by a few key ideas, and is repeated at every opportunity"(p.14). Also, research shows that the most important element leaders should be aware of when communicating is congruency between their own actions and their words (Supovitz, 2013; DuFour, 2004b; DuFour, 2002; DuFour et al., 2016; Tanner et al., 2017; Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). The inconsistency between what they say, and their priorities make leaders' actions overwhelming and hinder all other kinds of communication (Kotter, 1996, cited in DuFour et al., 2016; Sims & Penny, 2014). Furthermore, a good leader needs effective communication skills with the PLC members in order to help them build shared knowledge and to learn effective communication among them. By addressing this critical component so vital to the PLC process, the leader and team members will undoubtedly build consensus, a solid foundation and thus move from mere dialogue to action. The first step consists in defining a clear and compelling purpose that engages everyone.

2. *Creating the guidelines of a coalition.*

A high body of research shows that the first step of leaders of a high-performing PLC has been to gain the support of the key staff members so as to gain the expertise, energy and influence that can allow him (her) to lead a complex change process and have it rooted to the PLC culture (DuFour, 2004b; Fullan, 2007; DuFour, 2002; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Zhang, Liu & Wang, 2017; DuFour et al., 2016). According to DuFour et al. (2016), different terms are used in the literature to name that coalition: " leadership team," "guiding coalition," or simply "getting

the right people on the bus." The Wallace Foundation (2012, pp. 6-7), cited in DuFour et al. (2016, p. 27), stated that "a [..] longstanding consensus in leadership theory holds that leaders in all walks of life and all kinds of organization,[..] need to depend on others to accomplish the group's purpose and [..] to encourage the development of leadership across the organization". It is therefore very important to delegate one's leadership power to a leadership team selected on the basis of their influence on the rest of the members starting from the beginning to make things happen (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; DuFour, 2002; Hollins et al., 2004; Sacks, 2017). "If a mission is to be truly shared, it must be co-created, not sold, and co-creation requires a process that fully engages others" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 27). It is therefore primordial for PLC leaders to identify the "opinion leaders" among the most knowledgeable people who are respected, trustworthy and whose positions generally has a major influence on their peers, and secure them as their allies for the new mission. This of course means trusting them and building trust around them. In doing so the right forum will be created to discuss inevitable questions members will ask when a proposal is issued. DuFour et al. (2016) contend that if a PLC leader "can't persuade a small group of people of the merits of an idea, and enlist their help, there is little chance [he] will persuade the larger group" (p. 27). Succeeding in securing the help of this guiding coalition will facilitate the process of building a shared knowledge (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; DuFour, 2002; DuFour, 2004b; Fullan, 2007; Blitz, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; Sacks, 2017).

3. *Building a shared knowledge.*

For DuFour et al. (2016), "[a] cardinal rule of decision making in Professional Learning Community is that prior to making a decision, people must first build shared knowledge, that is, they must learn together" (p. 28) and thus have access to the same information to be discussed in order to arrive to the similar conclusions. This will prevent the group from making uninformed

decisions just because they did not get the right information from the start because the lack of pertinent information leads to merely debating opinions or what DuFour et al. (2016) call "retreating to a muddied middle ground" (p. 28). Presenting testimonials, new information or research about the topic to be debated, or site visits to performing PLCs will help understanding and will ease the assessment of the PLC current situations in terms of staff development and student achievement and build from there to make informed decisions or take actions. Building shared knowledge from the start will save time and make the improvement process more effective and actions taken will be more committed (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; DuFour, 2004b; Blitz, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007; Servage, 2008; Supovitz, 2013). This also will ease the PLC members' work on building a consensus on their mission statement because to avoid disagreements and allegations faculty should understand what standards must be met to make a collective decision.

Sims and Penny (2014) report teachers' shortcomings. "First, insufficient time was allocated to allow for sufficiently rich and robust work in the PLC setting. Moreover, the members of the administration appeared disengaged from the PLC process and unsupportive of its goals" (p. 43). The Group should make the difference between a *consensus* and *unanimity*. DuFour et al. (2016, p.32) defines consensus as follows: a "group has arrived at consensus when it meets two criteria. First, all points of views have not merely been heard, but have been actively solicited. Second, the will of the group is evident *even to those who most oppose it*" (emphasis in original). This means that the group members will move forward, even though some members oppose it because insisting on a unanimous decision will contradict the action orientation of a PLC looking for agreement from all members which will result in delay, frustration and mediocrity. The group should therefore find a strategy to arrive at a consensus, and one way

proposed by DuFour et al. (2016) consists in using a "quick and simple way to determine the will of the group [by using] the *fist* to *five* strategy" detailed on page 33. Depending on the result of the strategy, when consensus is met, all staff members will be expected to honor the group's decisions. They add that strategies can be varied but decision-making should not because it is "easier, more effective and less likely to end in disputes about process when a staff has a clear and operational definition of consensus" (p. 34) which will help establish a collective mission statement.

4. *The PLC mission statement.*

There is no correlation between a mission statement and school improvement and DuFour et al. (2016) explained this fact by showing the difference between *writing* a mission statement and *living* a mission statement. They stated that "the words of a mission statement are not worth the paper they are written on unless people begin to do differently" (p.34). To bring a PLC mission to life, the PLC leader and the guiding coalition should first of all build shared knowledge with the staff member and brainstorm the vivid vision of their dream school, and then lead them to discuss the specific commitment each individual member was ready to honor for the school to become the one of their dream. That discussion will lead the PLC to clarify their collective responsibility and commitment to achieve the collective goals of all members (DuFour, 2004b; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Fullan 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; 2016; Danielson, 2013; and Fullan, 2010). For DuFour et al. (2016), PLC leaders and the staff should take seven specific actions to convey their commitment to improve students' achievement. Below is the list we will detail later in this reflection.

1. Initiate structures and systems to foster qualities and characteristics consistent with a learning-centered school.

2. Create processes to monitor critical conditions and important goals.

3. Reallocate resources to support the proclaimed priorities.

4. Pose the right questions,

5. Model what is valued.

6. Celebrate progress, and

7. Confront violations of commitments.

Indeed, a powerful strategy for improving a school may consist in engaging PLC members in a reflective dialogue about their organization purposes and goals. DuFour et al. (2016) contend that the priorities of the organization should be defined, and members should not merely "hope" it happens, they should work on developing systematic plans that ensure the priorities happen. True priorities should be carefully planned and implemented in the most systematic way, and most importantly, they should be monitored.

> [W]hat gets monitored gets done. A critical step in moving an organization from rhetoric to reality is to establish the indicators of progress to be monitored, the process and timeline for monitoring them, and the means of sharing results with and getting input from people throughout the organization. (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 34).

Furthermore, members of a PLC need additional resources and additional time to collaborate and implement intervention programs for students who are struggling (DuFour, 2004b; Sims & Penny, 2014; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; & 2016). These are considered as prerequisites for a PLC by many researchers according to DuFour et al. (2016) but because of their importance, the ways the precious elements such as resources and time are spent are part of the unequivocal communication plans a PLC should go through.

DuFour et al. (2016) believe that while in the process of building a PLC every school

professional must engage with colleagues as a team dedicated to the ongoing exploration of the following questions: What knowledge, skills and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course or this grade level? How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills? How will we respond when some students do not learn? How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient? These are what DuFour et al. (2010; 2016) call the *four critical questions of the PLC in progress.* These questions are not enough; the leader of a PLC should model his (her) own commitment to the implementation of the PLC process by focusing on students' high levels of learning, but also by showing a high level of commitment in life-long learning and by putting this upfront for the whole team to imitate. In doing so, a leader is most likely to get the whole team "aboard" the process and thus have a first reason for celebrating progress as a real-life model by which teams can assess their own efforts. DuFour et al. (2016) state that

> When an organization makes a concerted effort to call attention to, and celebrate progress towards its goals, the commitment members demonstrate in day-to-day work, and evidence of improved results, people within the organization are continually reminded of the priorities and what it takes to achieve them. (p. 36)

One piece of advice PLC leaders should take is to spare the time to *publicly celebrate any progress* and to allow team members to know what is noted and appreciated in their hard work towards school improvement and better student achievement. Another important advice leaders should take is to be prepared to *confront team members* who do not work towards following the commitment of the whole staff by implementing the priorities of the PLC. If a leader of a PLC is not willing to defend and promote the improvement initiative of the team, he /she will jeopardize them because he/she "cannot verbally commit to a school mission of learning for all [and] allow

individuals within the organization to act in ways that are counterproductive to this commitment" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 37). These negative actions will impact student learning (the main goal of a PLC), but also the staff members because they will become skeptical about the process since the leadership is hedging on their commitment. Therefore, both confrontation and celebration are very important to the PLC process and need further addressing in this literature bearing in mind this powerful strategy for improvement, as a good reason for engaging all members in recurrent reflective dialogues leading to ways to uncover keys to meet the purpose of their organization based on the four pillars of the foundation of a PLC: Mission, Vision, Values and Goals.

Foundations of a PLC

1. The pillars.

For DuFour et al. (2016), the four pillars of *mission, vision, values* and *goals* constitute the foundations of a PLC. This image shows the importance of each of these pillars, since they sustain the foundations and furthermore each of them asks different questions team members should answer (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Blitz, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; Lomos et al., 2011). DuFour et al. (2016) assert that " [w]hen the teachers and the administrators have worked together to consider those [critical] questions and rich a consensus regarding their collective positions on each question, they have built a solid foundation for a PLC" (p. 37), even though a lot of work remains to be done in the process of collaborating in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. However, by building a solid foundation with the consideration they give to these questions, teams will increase the likelihood to achieve their goals; if they don't consider these questions or do so in a superficial way or failed to find a consensus, then future efforts will not find a solid ground.

a. Mission.

DuFour et al. (2016) contend that "[i]n a learning centered school, ensuring that all the students learn must be at the heart of its mission" (p.39). Members of a PLC should ask themselves the question *why*, by thinking "why do we exist?" to help work towards an agreement about the fundamental purpose of their school. Having a clarified purpose in the head of everyone becomes an important decision guiding principle and will help establish priorities for a PLC.

b. *Vision.*

The second pillar of the PLC foundation is *vision* and asks the question *what*? Members of the team try to create a compelling yet attractive and realistic future that describes their dreams of how they would like their school to become by pursuing the question "what must we become in order to accomplish our fundamental goal?" (DuFour et al., 2016, p.39). The vision pillar provides a sense of direction and is a basis of the assessment of their current reality and that reality's potential strategies, programs and procedures leading to the improvement of that reality. A whole body of literature within and outside of education acknowledges the very importance of a clear vision and magnifies building a shared vision because it can lead to the creation of what DuFour et al. (2016) call a "stop doing" list born from a current school policies and the procedures that are not well aligned to ensure higher student achievement (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Servage, 2008; Voogt, Laferriere, Breuleux, Itow, Hickey & McKenney, 2015; DuFour, 2002; Blitz, 2013; DuFour et al., 2008; Nicholson et al., 2016). They cite among other sources the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (2015) in its first standard that calls for educators to develop collaboratively a shared mission and vision and to promote every student's success by developing a vision of learning shared by

the whole school community, after its development articulation and implementation by the team of educators. This leads to the third pillar of the foundation of a PLC, values.

c. Values (collective commitments).

Identifying and writing the mission statement of the PLC and creating a shared vision are very important in building the foundation of a PLC but they are not sufficient according to DuFour et al. (2016) who assert that "[t]eachers and administrators must also tackle the collective commitments they will make an honor in order to achieve a shared vision for their school or district" (p. 41). Those collective commitments are clarified by the third pillar of the foundation of a PLC, *values*, which asks the question, *how must we behave to create the school that will achieve our purpose?* DuFour et al. (2016) went on explaining that "in answering this question educators shift from offering philosophical musings on mission or their shared hopes for the school of the future to making commitments to act in certain ways – starting today" (p. 41). This is so true that "[w]hen members of an organization understand the purpose of their organization, know where it is headed, and then pledge to act in certain ways to move it in the right direction, they don't need prescriptive rules and regulations to guide their daily work. Policy manuals and directives are replaced by commitments and covenants" (p. 41). The benefit will be team members enjoying a greater autonomy. They become more creative than their more supervised peers (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Blitz, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Sims & Penny, 2014; Windschitl, 2002; Servage, 2008; Vescio et al., 2008). Furthermore, the leader of the group will benefit from this and feel less pressure of the full responsibility of the *authoritative figure*. On the contrary, leaders of high performing PLCs operate with the full weight of the *moral authority* of the whole group because of the clearly specified collective commitment of all. Inappropriate behaviors will be classified as violations of the collective

commitments and the leader is no longer 'the boss' but the promoter and protector of those commitments. He/she will not be alone to insist in having values honored by all members because of internal accountability and responsibility, are shared by the whole team. Hargreaves (2010) understood this in this statement "[p]olicy principles are much more transposable and transportable if they are interpreted intelligently within communities of practice among and between those who are their bearers and recipients" (p. 11). However, DuFour et al. (2016) believe that "attention to clarifying collective commitment is one of the most important and regrettably, least utilized strategies in building the foundations of a PLC" (p. 42) and they fund this belief in the educational research and literature.

d. Goals.

One of the most essential driving elements of a collaborative team process is having goals to focus on. Woodland and Mazur (2015) showed how secondary schools that adopt PLCs reserve space and time for team collaboration in order to enable teachers to collectively assess and address issues of practice related to what and how students are learning (or not) in recurring cycle of improvement. This was shared by the literature on PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; DuFour et al., 2016; Curry, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Nelson & Slavit, 2008; Newmann, 1996). For DuFour et al. (2016), a definition of a team is a group of people who work together "*interdependently* to achieve a *common goal* for which all members are *mutually accountable*" (p.42). For them, there can be no true team without a common goal because "[e]ffective goals generate joint efforts and helps collaborative teams clarify how their work can contribute to school wide or district wide improvement initiatives" (p.42). This aligns with the fourth and final pillar of the foundation of a PLC, the *goals*, which asks PLC members to clarify their specific goals they aim to achieve as a result of

the organization improvement initiative by identifying their targets and the timelines that will enable them to answer the crucial assessment question: *how will we know if all of this is making a difference?* This final pillar fosters both results orientation as well as individual and collective accountability for achieving better student learning. It thus helps PLC team members identify their short-term priorities and the different steps to achieve the benchmarks in order to close the gap between the school's current situation and the PLC team members' shared vision. By creating short term-goals and routinely celebrating when those goals are achieved, schools foster a sense of confidence and a greater sense of self-efficacy among the staff because expecting success will make PLC members put forth more efforts to secure success (Hord & Sommers, 2008; DuFour et al., 2010). Those goals are therefore one of the driving engines of the PLC and they motivate the staff members to honor and fulfill the fundamental purpose of the PLC ensuring that all student learn in the highest way (Willis & Templeton, 2017; O'Neil et al., 2006; Servage, 2008; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000; DuFour, 2002; Blitz, 2013; Fullan, 2007; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008). Furthermore, according to Dufour et al. (2016), educational researchers and organizational theorists agree on the fact that measurable goals are the keys elements in an improvement process, they rest on long-term and short-term goals and actions members take to make things happen. So, as a summary, DuFour et al. (2016) contend that "[w]hen educators have addressed each of the four pillars [..] and arrived at both a shared understanding of and commitment to each pillar, they have the benefit of a solid foundation for [..] building their PLCs" (p. 42). Here are tips PLC leaders should follow to build a solid foundation for the PLC.

2. Process of Building the foundations of a PLC.

DuFour et al. (2016) believe that a PLC leader should move quickly in actions to get the

whole group aboard in a matter of weeks to avoid interminable debates and rewording and revising of the different elements because the possibility to return to the foundation and to improve them still exist during the process as the vision becomes clearer and clearer. Leaders will then build a shared knowledge with a guiding coalition who will help them with the information of the whole group and with getting them aboard (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Supovitz, 2013). Gathering and dissemination of information based on educational research but also accepting relevant information from all team members will motivate everyone and strengthen the ownership of the process in all members. The foundation will help in the PLC day-to-day decision-making and identify existing practices that need to be eliminated from the school principles. According to DuFour et al. (2008; 2010; 2016), effective leaders should translate the school vision into a 'teachable point of view" that is a succinct explanation of the PLC purpose and direction illustrated through engaging all team members emotionally and intellectually, by using simple language, and simple concepts free of jargon as well as common sense for persuasion. Another important tip is to write value statements as behaviors rather than beliefs. A powerful example provided by DuFour et al. (2016) is: "we will monitor each student learning on a timely basis and provide additional time and support for learning until the students become proficient". (p. 52) This helps clarify expectations more effectively as compared to a statement that asserts students' potentials or teachers' duties, but this also helps individuals focus more on themselves rather than on other members of the school community such as parents, students, school districts etc. since no commitment can be made on behalf of others. The external focus on what others must do fails to improve the situation and fosters a culture of dependency (Sparks, 2007, cited in DuFour et al., 2016). It is therefore very important to understand how creating a culture of self-efficacy, optimism and commitment will bring success. The process of

building a solid PLC foundation is neither linear no hierarchical or sequential, so it is cyclical, recurring and interactive. Furthermore, what is more important is what is done in the PLC and the results of higher student learning, but not what members pretend they are doing or have the intention of doing. It translates in having the PLC leaders "engage staff members in building shared knowledge of certain key assumptions and critical practices and then call upon them to act in accordance to their knowledge" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 52).

3. Process of Building a Collaborative Culture in a PLC.

Hollins et al. (2004) worked on a review of studies that investigated a self-sustaining learning community in which teachers engage in ongoing teacher-directed collaboration focusing on improving their classroom practices and Zhang et al. (2017) investigated peer coaching in Chinese online PLCs. DuFour et al. (2016) assert that "collaboration is not a virtue in itself, and building a collaborative culture is simply a means to an end and not the end itself'". For them "[t]he purpose of collaboration– to help more students achieve at higher levels– can only be accomplished if the professionals engaged in collaboration are focused on the *right work*" (p. 59, italics in original). The right work that focuses the collaborative efforts of the high achieving PLC rests on DuFour et al.'s (2016) *four critical questions of the PLC in progress* driving the work of a PLC: What knowledge, skills and dispositions should every student acquire as a result of this unit, this course or this grade level? How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills? How will we respond when some students do not learn? How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

Therefore focusing on the right PLC work means following the critical step-by step progress by first forming and strengthening their alliance with the key staff members that constitute the leading coalition helping in the building a deep understanding of the purpose of

their collaborative culture, before creating parameters and supports that guide their team discussion to right topics, and avoid unfruitful meetings (DuFour et al. 2008; 2010; 2016; Willis & Templeton, 2017). This will help leaders avoid assigning people to teams and assigning tasks and goals to the teams because teams will never stop struggling unless they arrive at a shared understanding of the key terms that guide their getting into teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members will feel mutually accountable. However cultural understanding of how people better work in groups may arise depending on societal groups. Zhang et al. (2017) stated, "[p]roviding compulsory training for such teachers may help them to conduct peer coaching more effectively" (p. 345). DuFour et al. (2016) summarize this in these terms: "[a] collection of teachers does not truly become a team until members must rely on one another to accomplish a goal that none could achieve individually" (p.60). This systematic process PLC members engage in under the supervision of the leader will help them analyze and impact their day-to-day practice both individually and as a team, and as a result student achievement will improve as well. A leader who develops a systematic process does not envision things to happen in a certain way, but he/she creates specific steps to make sure certain steps towards success are taken, because a good systematic process is a combination of related parts, organized into a whole, in a methodological, deliberate and orderly way, towards a particular aim (Windschitl, 2002; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Willis & Templeton, 2017; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Blitz, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al. 2008; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Stoll & Louis, 2007; and Hord, 2004). It is not "intended to be invitational, or indiscriminate" (DuFour et al. 2016, p. 60). This takes us back to that notion of tight and loose culture that should be built in a PLC. To create high performing teams a PLC leader should ensure all members are assigned to what DuFour et al. (2016) called a *meaningful*

team rather than merely *bringing random adults together and hope* they will start a sensible discussion that can yield positive results. He/ she should wonder if all team members have a shared responsibility in responding to the four critical questions in ways that can improve student achievement. There are many different ways teams can be structured.

4. Team structures.

According to DuFour et al. (2016), there are different ways PLC teams can be structured in order to ensure meaningful collaboration leading to collective success. Teams can be organized according to same course or grade levels, *vertical teams* from one level to the next, there can be *electronic teams* or *interdisciplinary teams*, but teachers can also follow a *logical link* that put them together. For DuFour et al. (2016) "the best team structure for improving student achievement is simple: a team of teachers who teach the same course or grade level" (p. 61) because they can question and explore the critical questions of learning with a naturally common interest. According to them, this is supported by a high body of research and literature, but the caveat is in some instances there might be only one teacher for one grade level or content area in very small schools or in areas outside the core curriculum. This should be taken into account and this particular teacher could join the vertical team by working with teachers above and /or below his grade level.

a. Vertical teams.

When working with colleagues in a vertical team each member has the benefit of working with at least two critical friends and thus can benefit from different suggestions for improvement as the team examines the indicators of student learning. They will therefore be able to collaborate while examining the evidence they gather about students who struggle in a grade level below or beyond the grade level they are teaching, they will be able to make the necessary adjustment in

instruction, pacing or curriculum content ahead of time (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hord, 1997; Lomos et al., 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008, DuFour et al., 2005; 2008; 2010; & 2016; Willis & Templeton, 2017; Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008). Interestingly vertical teams can work across school and therefore strengthen the program of a whole district by uniting teachers of the same content area and clarify the prerequisites for each grade level, because as DuFour et al. (2016) put it "proximity is not a prerequisite for an effective collaborative team" (p. 61) and electronic teams' efficiency is a good example of this view.

b. Electronic teams.

Technology can be a powerful tool to create strong partnerships with colleagues within the same school or the district, statewide and even worldwide. Blanchard (2007) cited in DuFour et al. (2016, p. 62) states that "[t]here is no reasons that time and distance should keep people from interacting as a team" for him "[w]ith proper management and the help of technology, virtual teams can be every bit as productive and rewarding as face-to-face teams". All that is needed to create an electronic team of colleagues teaching the same course or grade level is access to a computer (Vavasseur & MacGregor, 2008; Zhang et al., 2017; Supovitz, 2013; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; 2016; Anderson & Herr, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Lomos et al., 2011; Blitz, 2013). Useful tools that can help make it happen are software, such as Skype, to engage in real-time discussion, Google Docs to share files and Mikogo to share desktops. Indeed, technology can help create common pacing guides, common assessment, and share evidence of student learning and decide on intervention strategies when needed. Furthermore, leaders can use the same technology to monitor teams' work and educational professional development organization will easily assist staff to find the adequate teams to work with. Blitz (2013) worked

on a literature review examining the opportunity of online PLCs and hybrid forms of PLC and compared advantages and challenges of online and hybrid professional learning communities with those of traditional PLCs. She stated that "[t]he Internet and mobile communication technologies have greatly expanded opportunities for teams of educators to reflect and collaborate with each other and experts outside their schools—and even outside their districts—for learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving". (p. 3) According to her, the literature suggests that the greatest advantage of the online learning environment is in the flexibility of facilitating teachers' learning of subject matter and increase of pedagogical content knowledge. But if online learning in PLC can address a few issues such as electronic platforms providing teams with ready access to educational knowledge and resources without PLCs usual limitations of time, space, and pace, Zhang et al. (2017) contended that despite the acknowledged potential use of online PLCs in professional development emphasized by many researchers "there seems to be no common understanding of how teachers can support the professional development of their peers through the use of the online PLC." (p. 337). This therefore needs more investigation since more than half of the empirical reports about online PLCs were concerned with K–12 schools and generally describe PLCs that team up teachers across multiple schools or school districts (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Blitz, 2013; Lomos et al., 2011; and Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). Furthermore, Lomos et al. (2011) and Macgregor and Vavasseur (2015) think that online PLCs are part of the many aspects of professional community that need further investigation. Macgregor and Vavasseur's (2015) study offers deeper insights into how communities of practice can be extended to facilitate interactions among principals and teachers providing a virtual environment so that principals provide leadership and teachers discuss instructional issues during professional conversations,

but the impact of virtual leadership should be studied. Therefore, DuFour and Reason (2016) contended that "the ubiquity of access to technology means that every teacher is able to engage in powerful collaboration even without the benefit of having a colleague in the building who teaches the same content" (p.62). However, we cannot be oblivious to the many issues related to the use of technology in schools. Can this be suitable for the next kind of teams: the interdisciplinary teams?

c. The interdisciplinary teams.

The interdisciplinary team model can also be very effective for collaboration but if the teams do not share common content or objectives in their teaching they will inevitably focus on what they have in common, *the students,* because "in an interdisciplinary structure, each team in the school should be asked to create overarching curricular goals that members will work together interdependently to achieve" (DuFour, 2016, p. 62). A good example of this would be, as Reeves (2006) shows, the awareness of using the power of nonfiction writing to improve other subjects such as mathematics, science or social studies asking the right questions for better student learning. But DuFour et al. (2016) persisted in asserting that these teams cannot be as successful as across level or course teams as research has proven, and they add that middle and high school are mistaken to put all their eggs in the same basket of interdisciplinary teams, and should on the contrary, use both team structures - interdisciplinary and across course / grade level - to focus on and improve student achievement (Blitz, 2013; Vescio et al., 2008; Lomos et al., 2011; Stoll & Louis, 2007; DuFour et al., 2010; 2016; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

d. Logical link structure.

According to DuFour et al. (2016, p. 63), "[s]pecialist teachers can become members of

grade-level or course-specific teams that are pursuing outcomes linked to their areas of expertise." They can thus become a consultant to the teams on the creation and use of supplementary materials, instructional strategies and alternative assessment to help special education student achieve the goals and outcomes of a course. These special teachers can help uncover natural skills that can be used in teaching or assessing the students' achievements. So, for DuFour et al. (2016), "what is most important to understand is that teachers should be organized into structures that allow them to engage in meaningful collaboration that is beneficial to them and their students" (p.64) by having a shared responsibility for responding to the four critical questions relative to student enhanced learning. For that of course they need resources and time for collaboration and implement the collective commitments to enhance the effectiveness of the PLC teams.

Collective commitments to enhance the effectiveness of teams

1. **Time for collaboration.**

Tanner et al. (2017) stated, " the challenge for any educational leader when implementing a new initiative is to establish a culture that engages all stakeholders" (p. 38). Tanner et al. (2017) also added, "Instructional coaching requires a leader to facilitate the process and to engage stakeholders to ensure the intended instructional benefits of the instructional coaching process to take place" (p. 38). Issues in all professional development programs translate in PLCs as well. They need money, resources, space and time for collaboration; a reciprocal accountability demands that PLC leaders who ask teams to work collaboratively should create the structure for meeting time during their contractual hours, and DuFour et al. (2016) and other researchers think that it is not sincere to stress the importance of collaborating when they do not provide time and resources to make it happen (Supovitz, 2013; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014;

Darling-Hammond, 2013; Talbert, 2010; Vescio, et al., 2008; Barnes et al., 2010). All organizations should show what they consider as priorities by allocating resources and one of the most precious resource in a school is time, hence the importance to give PLC members enough time for collaboration (Barnes et al., 2010; Dufour et al., 2008; 2010; & 2016; Sims & Penny, 2014). It is true that modern world realities make it difficult for school districts to allocate time for PLC members to collaborate because of constraints such as childcare for some working parents if students are released earlier from school to allow time for meetings and community pressure to stop releasing kids early can stop district's initiatives in many cases (Dufour et al., 2016). Sims and Penny (2014) found that "[t]ime was seen as a negative aspect of being a part of the PLC. The lack of a common conference period was negative" (p. 41). Barnes et al. (2010) thought that developing PLCs needs time, connections among leaders, and space but also incentives for principals, and finally, the kind of capacity building resources such as knowledgeable facilitators and knowledge about effective instructional leadership. Talking about incentives in PLCs, DuFour et al. (2016) noted that some district had to pay teachers extra hours so that they extended their school day to provide time for collaboration, but of course money issues often arise which can become a cost prohibitive burden for the district, let alone hiring substitute teachers. Furthermore, even teachers and administrators are often reluctant to lose precious time for collaboration, so this remains an internal issue pertaining to professional development. They believe that there are alternatives that addressed the issue and deserve to be explored in the literature and in the website they created, and they offered strategies as steps districts and school have taken to address the issue of finding time for collaboration.

Among other alternatives, DuFour et al. (2016) chose the *common preparation* that is allowed a slot in the daily planning so that teachers of the same course or department can plan to

engage in a weekly planning period during a chosen day for each team. Another strategy will be the *parallel scheduling* where teachers provide lessons to the entire grade level at the same time each day allowing the PLC team the possibility to choose one day a week for collaboration. The option to *adjust start and end time* is another way of gaining time for collaboration by starting the workday early and finishing it later than the usual hours one day a week and making adjustments during the day so that the time is regaining by the end of the day or the week. DuFour et al. (2016) gave the example of a school in Illinois where " [b]y making [..] minor arrangements to the schedule one day a week each week, the entire faculty is guaranteed an hour of collaborative planning without extending their workday or workweek by a single minute" (p.66).

Teachers in some schools find it useful to *share classes* by combining students across two grade levels or courses into a single class for instruction so that they can alternate instruction and collaboration: when one teacher/team is teaching the other can meet with others for collaboration. They also organize students so as to have older ones tutor or mentor younger ones in shared classes. This is also useful with *shared activities, events and testing* where PLC teams coordinate activities requiring student supervision rather than teaching such as watching a DVD or video or reading aloud among other activities. *Banked time* can allow them to extend the working time during a certain number of days during a certain period of time so that they can end the school day earlier so as to allow teachers to use the banked minutes for collaboration while students, under the supervision of non-teaching staff, stay in the school premises and engage in clubs, enrichment activities sponsored by parents or community partners. Lastly, for *in-service and faculty meeting time,* extended time is scheduled to give the PLC members time to work collaboratively during professional development days. For DuFour et al. (2016), time for

collaboration is also useful in clarifying the right work of PLC members.

2. Clarifying the right work.

One of the most important ways a leader ensures that all PLC members are clear about the work to do and to increase the likelihood of the group's success is to provide the needed support because DuFour et al. (2016) think it is easy to assign staff members to teams and provide time for collaboration but meaningful teams "arrive at the fork in the road in a PLC process when they determine how they will use that collaborative time" (p. 67); for them merely assigning teachers to teams does not ensure effective collaboration. On the contrary what passes for collaboration, was coined by Perkins (2003), cited in DuFour et al. (2016) as *"co-blaboration*". The Boston Consulting Group (2014), cited in DuFour et al. (2016), asserts that "unproductive team meetings cerate cynicism and only serve to sour teachers' attitudes toward teaming while simultaneously reinforcing the norms of isolation so prevalent in our schools". The essence of a PLC is to improve student learning but unfortunately members are more akin to discuss such things as dress codes or tardiness, appropriateness of certain festivals like Halloween parties but once back in their classrooms they keep on the same routines (Willis & Templeton, 2017). This is different from the mission of a PLC which consists in having members focus on specifics during the time provided for collaboration so that they can make change to their instructional practices and utilize new strategies and repertoire of skills and materials, assessments and ideas to impact student learning in the most positive way. Furthermore, DuFour et al. (2016) explained that "[t]hose who hope to improve student achievement by developing the capacity of staff to function as a PLC must create and foster the conditions that move educators from mere work groups to high-performing teams" (p. 67). Therefore, staying focused on the goals of a PLC and creating the good elements to make it happen is more than important.

DuFour et al. (2016) designed a worksheet to help teams address the critical issues for team collaboration on page 69 because they believe that "the most important elements of reciprocal accountability that districts and school leaders must address is establishing the clear parameters and priorities that guide teamwork toward the goals of improved student learning " (p. 68). I adapted those guidelines to generate interview questions to inquire about the process of the PLC I studied. Another important aspect is the leaders' supervision of the team progress in order to be aware of the PLC struggles and to provide the needed help dictated by his/her own responsibilities and to share problems, concern and successes (Barnes et al., 2010; Servage, 2008; Willis & Templeton, 2017; Sims & Penny, 2014; Vescio et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Talbert, 2010). Clearly establishing expectations and timelines make team collaboration easy and avoids loss of time in *co-blaboration* and help to establish PLC team members' collective commitment to enhance their effectiveness.

3. Establishing collective commitments to enhance the effectiveness of teams.

Issues that prevent teachers from engaging in a constructive conversation about teaching and learning during the PLC meetings are many (Windschitl, 2002; Servage, 2008; Sims & Penny, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). We already talked about the reluctance to change classroom practices, but DuFour et al. (2016) add another layer regarding teachers fear of being judged by the administration and their peers and they contend that teachers who should work collaboratively to clarify the essential learning outcomes for their courses and grade levels, design assessment tools, and jointly analyze students' results, "must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principals as ineffective" (p. 71). They think that in establishing a cohesive and high-performing PLC team, members should first and foremost establish a *vulnerability-based trust* among them

by acknowledging mistakes, weaknesses, failures and the need for help from other team members whose values strength and skills, they should recognize and want to learn from. These issues are common to all professional development programs indeed (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Talbert, 2010; Sims &Penny, 2014; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Servage, 2008; DuFour 2004; Vescio et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007; Windschitl, 2002). This fear of vulnerability is coupled with a second dysfunction of PLCs, the *avoidance of productive conflict* for which they prefer artificial harmony to insightful self-questioning and advocacy (Willis & Templeton, 2017; DuFour et al, 2010; 2016; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Vescio et al., 2008; Horn & Little, 2010; Servage, 2008); they thus avoid topics that require interdependent work and decisions that need joint efforts fail to yield genuine commitment. This leads to another issue the *avoidance of accountability.*

Avoidance of accountability is seen in team members who are unwilling to confront their peers who fail to honor teamwork toward collective decision-making and PLC goals. This is dramatic because when team members are unwilling to commit to the purpose, priorities and decisions, and do not want to hold each other accountable for the team's successes and failures, then they will inevitably overlook the teams' results. DuFour et al. (2016) cite, on page 71, Lenciano (2003) to summarize the trust and accountability flaws in a PLC: "[w]hen groups demonstrate the five dysfunctions of a team – inability to (1) establish trust, (2) engage in honest dialogue regarding disagreement, (3) make commitments to one another, (4) hold each other accountable, and (5) focus on results, the team process begins to unravel." But leaders can help teams avoid these dysfunctions that hinder effectiveness in PLC processes differently (Webb et al., 2009; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Barnes et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Talbert, 2010; Sims & Penny, 2014; DuFour 2004; Vescio et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007; DuFour, et al.,

2008; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Wasta, 2017; Willis & Templeton, 2017). There is a strong need to balance the data scales "to move the collaborative process from a singular focus on student performance data to a more balanced approach that combines student performance data with adult practice data" (Wasta, 2017, p. 68). But Hargreaves (2010) cautions about policy changes and how these communities of practice should engage with educational policies in order to make committed and sincere efforts to improve together. For him, that will help ease effective and sustainable policy development and implementation.

Following the tight and loose elements of a PLC, and showing their human and humane sides, and acting as a true member of the team, leaders "can model vulnerability, enthusiasm for meaningful exploration of disagreement, articulation of public commitment, willingness to confront those who fail to honor decisions and an unrelenting focus on and accountability for result" (DuFour et al., 2016, p.71). In addition, they should bear that in mind that in order to better help the PLC members engage in professional dialogue, they need to address the dangers of a dysfunctional team (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Horn & Little, 2010; Servage, 2008; Vescio et al., 2008). Sims and Penny (2014) stated that teachers reported complaints of insufficient time allocated to PLC members for sufficiently rich and robust work. They also noted "the members of the administration appeared disengaged from the PLC process and unsupportive of its goals" (p. 5). They also noted that a PLC team member perceived negatively the support from the administration. "This member's perception was that the administrator saw her expectations for her students to be too high. When discussing a student's situation with an administrator, the team member said the administrator responded with, "[y]our expectations are too high." (p. 5). Moreover, Woodland and Mazur (2015) and Servage (2008) believe that administration's increased pressure on schools to collect data, give evidence of

student growth, and quantitatively measure instructional quality resulted in mere implementation of various reform measures aiming at raising classroom teaching (Willis & Templeton, 2017).

Woodland and Mazur (2015) referred to this as the *hammer* (policy makers' rigorous educator evaluation) because its mandatory and high stakes nature is meant to improve teaching at the secondary school level (Firestone, 2014, cited in Woodland &Mazur, 2015). School and teacher accountability for student achievement (usually as measured by standardized test scores) stressed by federal policies resulted in educator evaluation designed to remove from the teaching profession ineffective or "bad" teachers (Hazi & Rucinski, 2014; Servage, 2008; Marzano, 2012 cited in Woodland & Mazur, 2015), but also to make sure that teachers who remain on the job show evidence of their continued teaching effectiveness (Darling- Hammond, 2013; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Wasta, 2017; Servage, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000). As professionals, almost all teachers at some time in their career have worked in groups that were drastically inefficient and ineffective because they failed to clarify their expectations of one another regarding their responsibilities, procedures and relationship (Sims & Penny, 2014). DuFour et al. (2016) reported a study by Druskar & Wolff (2001) in which a high-performing PLC team members showed *high emotional intelligence* in the challenging task of articulating commitment for each other with the below characteristics, and PLCs leaders might consider using these strategies.

As we stated earlier, team members should be humble and consider the challenges from the other team member's perspectives by decentering. This *perspective taking* helps members have *intrapersonal understanding* by showing accurate understanding of the struggles other team members go through and their feelings, concerns and interests whether they are spoken or silent. But this does not shut out the *willingness to confront* team members who do not honor the

decisions of the team. They therefore need to learn how to speak up in a caring way aimed at building consensus and shared interpretations of the team's commitments because *caring orientation* requires members to communicate positive attitudes, appreciation and respect to other staff members since validation of teamwork is critical to PLC work. That's how they show willingness and ability to self-evaluate its effectiveness and *solicit feedback* from other external sources on the process of PLC improvement. In doing so, team members will stay positive and cultivate positive affect and behavior so as to grow in a *positive environment* with images of what was positive in the past, present and future using *proactive problem solving* skills because they understand that they belong to, and have the PLC *organizational awareness*. Druskar & Wolff (2001), cited in DuFour et al. (2016) also think that only this can help team members *build external relationships* with people who act as advocates and who can help them in the process and hold their hands as they grow towards their goals of improving student learning (Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Graham, 2007; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; and Wasta, 2017). DuFour et al. (2016) advise again and again as a leitmotiv that PLC members have an open honesty and install an open dialogue about their expectations in discussions that allow all to voice their reflections about their past and present experiences as professionals. Open honesty will allow team members to turn their attention to identify "commitments that would prevent the negative and promote the positive aspects of team members if all participants pledge to honor those norms" (p. 73). DuFour et al. (2016) believe that "when well done, norms can help establish the trust, openness, commitment, and accountability that move teams from the trivial to the substantive" (p. 74). We are listing here again as a summary the six steps they offer for PLCs to follow when creating successful norms all members should abide by, to ease their process of addressing the critical steps of shared commitment.

1. Each team should create its own norms
2. Norms should be stated as commitments to act or behave in certain ways rather than as beliefs
3. Norms should be reviewed at the beginning and end of each meeting for at least six months.
4. Teams should formally evaluate their effectiveness at least twice a year
5. Teams should focus on a few essential norms rather than creating an extensive laundry list.
6. One of the team's norms should clarify how the team will respond if one or more members are not observing the norms.

Therefore, according to DuFour et al. (2016), if they do not want to fail, teams should work with the benefits of these well-defined collective commitments. Furthermore, they should collaboratively develop and pursue SMART goals (O'Neil et al., 2006) and every individual teacher and teams must have access to timely and relevant information.

Once again DuFour et al. (2016) call leaders to refrain from opposing providing time for collaboration because "the very reason any organization is established is to bring people together in an organized way to achieve a collective purpose that cannot be accomplished by working alone" (p. 75) and the "inability to work interdependently has been described as the 'biggest opponent' and a 'mortal enemy' of those who confront complex tasks in their daily work" (Patterson et al., 2008, cited in DuFour et al., 2016). Therefore, time created for collaboration is not unproductive time (Darling-Hammond, 2013; DuFour, 2004b; Talbert, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Fullan, 2007).

On the contrary, DuFour et al. (2016) repeatedly cited research and organizational

literature that ensure that "effective organizations and effective schools build time for reflection and dialogue into every process." (p. 75) They believe that the goal is to build a culture of continuous improvement and to find ways to become better at achieving the teams' purpose in a recurring cycle, and others such as Darling-Hammond (1996), and Woodland and Mazur (2015) share the same view. It is obvious that the time created for collaboration should be used to focus on discussion about issues most related to teaching and achieving high student learning. Fullan (2001; 2007) believed that collaborative cultures that have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but they may end up being powerfully wrong if they do not focus on the right things. Thus, it will never be enough to remind leaders to direct collaboration towards the critical questions in order to achieve the goal of improving students' higher learning. Woodland and Mazur (2015) consider that PLCs should be more of a "hug" and not the "hammer" evaluation systems. For many authors, PLCs are low stakes, they are not mandatory, and they are not a predicator of collegial relationships (Scribner et al., 2007; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Woodland & Mazur, 2015; DuFour et al., 2008; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; DuFour et al., 2010; Hord, 2004; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007; Supovitz et al., 2010).

4. Focusing on the result orientation.

Result orientation is not the focus of this study but the goals of the process of a PLC is to enhance student learning and, thus, deserves some consideration. The reason for any teacher professional development has always been to improve student achievement by improving teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2014, cited in Tanner et al., 2017). Saunders et al. (2009) believe in the importance of breaking down barriers to increase teacher collaboration, nurture shared values and commitments, reflective discussion, and common data analysis and assessments, and finally plan instruction focusing on student learning instead of teaching strategies. The acknowledged

strong evidence of PLC efficacy in improving student teaching for more than two decades of experience of implementation of PLC programs, also concerns strong evidence that implementing data-driven PLCs in particular, has positive effects on student achievements (Saunders et al., 2009; Marsh, 2010; Mokhtari & Edwards, 2009; Berry et al., 2005; Sims & Penny, 2014; Wasta, 2017; Vescio et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al. 2010; DuFour et al., 2016; Fullan, 2002; and Voogt et al., 2015). For example, Berry et al. (2005) found a 50% to 80% student performance improvement. However, in spite of this evidence of PLC efficacy, not every PLC yield benefits to students and faculty and a variety of reasons may explain why PLCs can be unsuccessful for team collaboration and student achievement (Woodland & Mazur, 2015; Vescio et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; Sims & Penny, 2014). Vescio et al. (2008) cautioned that current professional development literature has extensively studied and reported the virtues of learning communities, but "only recently has the focus of this literature shifted to empirically examining the changes in teachers' practices and students' learning as a result of professional learning communities" (p. 2). Furthermore, Mcgregor and Vavasseur (2015) reported in their study the quality of the instructional unit plans assessed according to six criteria: connections to the school curriculum and the standards, learning and teaching objectives that are clearly defined and well aligned with learning activities, but also appropriate integration of technology, aligned with the procedures of technology standards, and assessments.

Having given consideration to all these important elements of the process of a PLC, I focused more on the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of all team members and team leaders and studied how they deal with the tight elements in a PLC and how they proceed in creating time for collaboration, how they clarify the right work, and how they follow the guidelines of their coalition by building a shared knowledge in order to implement their mission,

vision, and values (collective commitments) in order to achieve their PLC goals**.** I conducted a Phenomenological Case-Study (Creswell, 2014) to study how PLC members go about addressing the critical steps of the building of a culture of collaboration under the conceptual framework of constructivism via situated learning, and DuFour (2016) rating scale on pages 69-70: *Critical Issues for Team Consideration* that I will change into questions and have experts validate them**.**

Deficiencies in the Studies

If DuFour (2004) and Dufour et al. (2008; 2010; and 2016) magnified the work of PLC members who potentially can build a strong culture of communication by following their Handbook for Professional Learning Community at Work (2016), the reality in the literature seems to be different. Cormier and Olivier (2009) in their literature review describing key characteristics of successful Professional learning communities (PLCs) in a school setting, considered that PLCs are a viable process for consideration in addressing school improvement needs. They researched the characteristics of PLCs, the role principals and teachers play in the PLCs by examining extensively the contemporary studies, and theoretical frameworks involving PLCs. The rationale behind Cormier and Olivier's (2009) literature review is that studies on PLCs generally illustrated successful results in affecting student achievement such as in Levine (2010), Andrews and Lewis (2002), Stoll et al. (2006), Belenardo (2001) and DuFour and Eaker (1998), but they found that the literature suggested varied and often misunderstood current perceptions and applications of PLCs in the K-12 school setting (Hord & Sommers, 2008; DuFour et al., 2008; 2010; 2016).

Cormier and Olivier (2009) found two benefactors of the PLCs literature review on the School Community: the school leaders and school districts regarding the description of the characteristics associated with successful PLCs, by raising awareness of PLCs among leaders as

validation or comparison of team member's existing efforts in their school or district. School administration and teams of teachers serve specific and shared responsibilities in the initiation and maintenance of a site-based professional learning community (Coleman, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2006; Tanner et al., 2017; and DuFour et al., 2008). The second potential benefactor is the research community in that the recurring dialogue and the synthesis of a conceptual framework for PLCs will yield a better understanding and a clearer description (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013). Cormier and Olivier (2009) stated that "[t]he attempt to develop a conceptual framework as a synthesis of existing scholarly constructs will eventually create a standard view of professional learning communities that may provide a comprehensive description and understanding" (p. 10).

As PLCs develop over time, researchers and scholars came up with their own definitions. A conception of PLCs in schools that refers to teachers and staff following the five dimensions was stated in Hord (1997). The five dimensions are *supportive and shared leadership*; *shared values and vision; collective learning and application of learning*; *supportive conditions,* and finally *shared personal practice.* Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) suggested that PLCs increase teachers' formal knowledge combined with practice knowledge. They identify three distinct prominent conceptions of teacher learning.

The first conception is referred to as "knowledge-for-practice" or formal knowledge and theory taught by university researchers for teachers to use in order to improve practice. The next conception of teacher learning is "knowledge-in-practice" the most essential knowledge for teaching also called practical knowledge embedded in practice and reflective teaching. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) mirroring Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of Situated Cognition assumed that "teachers learn when they have opportunities to probe the knowledge embedded in

the work of expert teachers and/or to deepen their own knowledge and expertise as makers of wise judgments and designers of rich learning interactions in the classroom." (p. 250). Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) third conception of teacher learning involves "knowledge of-practice", but they contend that, knowledge-of-practice is unlike the first two conceptions and cannot be understood in terms of a universe of knowledge dividing formal knowledge from practical knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tanner et al., 2017). However, is it enough?

For Servage (2008), studying best practices is valuable and useful as a form of teacher learning, but it is incomplete as a representation of collaborative processes; therefore it is not transformative because while improved pedagogical skills undoubtedly impact positively, focusing exclusively on these skills does not promote the required critical reflection for understanding PLCs and schools as complex social and political entities. Servage (2008) believed that transformation cannot occur if the school is unable to collectively imagine other possibilities for itself; hence the importance of considering the "extent to which teachers themselves must undergo transformation, if substantive and sustainable change will occur" (p. 67). For her, transformative learning theory proposes impacts that are significant for personal and professional growth. This is ideally supported by critical friendship in a psychologically safe group setting (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Servage (2008) considered that this means to help consider more fully the possibilities and limits of the change that can be expected from collaborative learning, and this helps for a better understanding of why the establishment of a PLC is more challenging than anticipated. Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins and Towner (2004) stressed the importance of a facilitator helping teachers stay focused on the PLC goal of improving African American students' literacy during all group meetings. The leader worked to ensure that all efforts of team collaborations were always focused on improving test scores and

other measurements of African American student achievement but what about the teachers themselves? Senge et al. (1990) offer a dynamic set of structures in what they call the "Five Disciplines": *personal mastery, systems thinking, mental models, shared vision,* and *team learning*. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) wrote that each of these five disciplines includes principles able to guide successful learning, mastery practice, and testing in people's lives and work. However, Caldwell (2012) believed that "Senge's learning organization falters as a theory of organizational learning precisely because it is intrinsically a theory of leadership that narrows rather than expands the critical exploration of agency, learning and change in organizations" (p. 52). It is therefore obvious that the literature on PLCs is varied but generally does not address the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration as described prescriptively by Dufour et al. (2008; 2010; 2016) which opens the doors to possible research on this topic.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD DESIGN

Type of Research

I chose a Phenomenological Case Study research design to inquire about members' lived experiences during their PLC process because according to Creswell (2007) this is a great way to study "[m]ultiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon" of PLCs which is a "bound system such as a process [..]or multiple individuals" (p.120). Indeed, as stated earlier DuFour et al. (2016) describe the PLC as a process in which members work in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research. This research design is suitable for my study because it aligns with how Creswell (2007) defines the characteristics of both phenomenology and case study research design data collection activities regarding such things as the site of the study, how to gain access, sampling, the types of data and ways to collect them, issues researchers might encounter, and ethical considerations during the data collection, analysis and reporting approach.

For Wenger and Snyder (2000), communities of practice is a term describing a group of people in a professional environment who come together to share experience and expertise with three criteria to establish its existence: mutual engagement, jointly negotiated enterprise, and shared repertoire (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). Members establish mutual engagement when they meet and interact, their jointly negotiated enterprise aims at developing a purpose for their interaction, and the group uses shared repertoire with linguistic and extra linguistic resources (Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015). As Wenger and Snyder (2000) stated, the participants in a community of practice learn together focusing on challenges that directly relate to their work. But how effective has this been for the whole body of teacher learners gathered in a PLC?

My study investigated how members address the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration in a Professional Learning Community. DuFour et al. (2016) explained the importance of a collaborative team in the school improvement process because collaboration does not lead to improved results if the people are not focused on the PLC's Right Work. They cautioned about the happenings when colleagues willingly discuss issues but never implement the discussion outcomes once back in their classroom because collaboration is a systematic process and teachers work interdependently as a team to impact their teaching practices, improve students' achievements. PLC members are expected to work and learn together to build shared knowledge on how to better achieve goals and meet the needs of the students they serve (Windschitl, 2002; Tanner et al., 2017; Fullan, 2007; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Vescio et al., 2006; Barnes et al., 2010; Lomos et al., 2011).

Sample

For this study, I implemented a purposeful sample composed of veteran teachers, including those identified as teacher leaders, as well as administrative leaders within a school district's Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the Midwestern USA. I chose purposeful sampling because it is appropriate for a purely qualitative study using focus groups for team members from the Professional Learning Community and individual interviews for the identified leaders. Furthermore, this study took place in their natural setting, school, where the PLC team members teach (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). My target population is not generalizable because cultural norms are different from one geographical location to the other and a culture is meaningful inside its geographical location. But the thick description I use will help other researchers make connections with their own population.

I sought to obtain a list of the individual members or teachers of the entire accessible population by contacting the administrative leader of the school district. I contacted the administrators to obtain permission to access the list of all PLC members and ask teachers and leaders to be participants in my study. I was then able to describe the lived experiences of the different groups as well as how they interacted with each other, and I was able to examine relationships between members of the PLC. I attended and observed a meeting of the PLC leaders and those of the PLC team members. In addition, I conducted interviews with PLC Leaders and asked teachers to volunteer to become part of a focus group in order to get their perceptions about the PLC process. I then triangulated the findings from the observations, interviews and focus groups, and finally the PLC documents analysis data.

Instruments

I used qualitative research methods to describe the lived experiences of PLC teams during the building of their school's culture of working collaboratively and especially how they addressed the critical steps as described in DuFour et al. (2016). I value studying the phenomenon as described by participating teachers and PLC leaders who have all experienced it (Creswell, 2014). I believe that qualitative data helped me study the shared patterns of behaviors of PLC members in the process, the program designs, activities and activity outcome in the achievement of both teacher learners and students, all in the natural setting of the school or district (Creswell, 2014). I used DuFour's et al. (2016) Critical Issues for Team Consideration list (pp. 69-70.) I adapted these issues into interview questions and had them examined by a group of experts (see appendices F1 & F2) to determine if the questions adequately address these issues. The instrument addresses the critical issues a PLC team needs to consider when building a culture of collaboration.

Data Collection

For my qualitative data collection and analysis, I followed the protocols I designed (see Appendices A to I) to inquire about the main concerns, keeping a focus on my research questions, the conceptual framework of Situated Learning and Social Constructivism using DuFour et al. (2016) model of a PLC during the data collection and analysis phases. The data I collected helped me study the shared patterns of behaviors of PLC members in the process, the program designs, activities and outcomes in the achievement of both teacher learners and students, all in the natural setting of their school district (Creswell, 2007; 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; and Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

A combination of team meeting observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis was a great way to gather valuable qualitative data and allowed me to have visual and audio input. This shed light on program designs, mechanisms of funding, stakeholders' preparedness, relationships, aspirations, motivation, interdependence and mutual accountability, but also successes or failures. Visual and audio inputs enabled easy coding in views to enhance rigor and trustworthiness during the treatment and interpretation of the data.

Building a culture of collaboration in a Professional Learning Community encompasses a great deal of human relationship, interaction, exchange and managerial skills, but it also includes a lot of disposition and professional attitudes and behavior from all sides (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2006; and Hord, 2009). I anticipated that cultural norms might make it difficult to obtain a long list of participants because they might feel that are under perpetual surveillance since it might look like an evaluation of their program. Furthermore, possible participants might have been suspicious about what might be done with their responses. I took all possible steps to protect their anonymity.

Proposed Method of Data Analysis

To better understand my qualitative data, I combined conversational analysis with interpretative phenomenological analysis by means of coding, categorizing and forming concepts or themes as a means to classify data from document analysis, interviews/focus groups, and observations field notes. I gathered non-verbal cues during the interactions to make meaning out of the raw data that I collected with the questions I designed using DuFour's et al. (2016) Critical Issues for Team Consideration list (pp. 69-70). Once the qualitative data was collected, I followed a planned step-by-step process of analysis of my audio and visual data to show transparency and trustworthiness (see fig. 1). Visual and audio files were assigned numbers and dates. Then I transcribed the audio files and gave transcripts new numbers and new pseudonyms in order to attend to confidentiality following my promise in the consent form. I created back-up files and put the data in useful files (all the files secured in a bigger one entitled 'My Research'), and then a 'Research Journal' for my reflections and interrogations. I then looked carefully at the data and tried to relate findings to the research questions, the literature review and the framework. I am aware of the iterative nature of the process, so I kept in mind the necessity to always date and number every datum and all its versions but also to put them in a secure location for confidentiality during the coding process and after. The planned step-by-step process of analysis of the qualitative data showed transparency and brought trustworthiness. I had a General Approach with a thematic deductive and inductive coding from the philosophical framework of social constructivism and DuFour et al. (2016) model of a PLC that better enabled data analysis for addressing the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration.

The emerging themes were recorded in a "Code Book" with different versions (Creswell, 2014). I used Saldaña's (2015) Coding, Categorizing, and Concepts to look for commonalities in

the data and move from raw data to meaningful concepts or themes, coding audio and visual data into meaningful chunks, thus moving from data to themes. I also renamed the new emerging themes accordingly. To strengthen the process by adding texture and depth to the analysis, I went back to the data to look for things that might have been overlooked and (or) unexpected findings that could possibly force me to reframe how I approached my study. I renamed synonyms and clarified terms making sure to stay consistent with them while continuing the iterative process of modifying initial lists again and again until categories were reduced and meaningful. I took into account the most or least important categories in order to avoid discarding data that might carry important information susceptible to yield new themes when tied to the literature and the research questions. This prepared me for a member check and the need to find reliable people for feedback to confirm my findings. I avoided fabricating data or to "cherry-pick" what I want to hear or see. Because of self-awareness and self-disclosure, I stayed reflexive and constantly compared and contrasted data (Creswell, 2014) to attend to issues of rigor, confidentiality, trustworthiness and ethics when analyzing data and reporting findings. I was then able to describe the lived experiences of my participants. However, I understand it was not possible to make a generalization of the study's findings.

Potential Ethical Problems

1. **Research Ethics.**

I anticipated that cultural norms would make it difficult to obtain the list of team members because they might feel that they were under perpetual surveillance from the administration, and it might look like an evaluation of their participation in the process. Furthermore, participants could have been suspicious about what might be done with their responses. This might be a source of biased responses to the interview and focus group questions.

Other sources that studied the phenomenon had different numbers of participants, but I wanted to have at least four participants per team and a total of four to five teams (around 20 participants).

I gave the consent forms for types of data to be collected (observation, interview etc.), reminded them that their responses were confidential. I explained the IRB requirements about their roles and rights during the study, and I explained again how the data was to be collected, stored, studied and used during my study and after according to our agreement but also that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalties. I again stated the time necessary to complete the study before they completed and signed it, then I gave them their personal copy**.** I then checked if they understood or if they had questions about the different protocols (see appendices A to I). I kept in mind my conceptual framework of Situated Learning and Social Constructivism using DuFour et al. (2016) model of a PLC during the data collection and analysis so that new insights might arise from the interview to uncover hidden aspects of the critical steps of building a culture of collaboration in a PLC regarding disposition, attitudes and professional behavior, but also about PLC Team Leaders and administrators' responsibilities in the implementation of the program. The protocol for my observations, interviews and focus groups was comprised of a script that allowed me to remind participants of my human subject requirements related to informed consent and their roles and rights. This logical consistency espouses the description of rigor in qualitative research according to Saldaña (2015) and Creswell (2014). It shows the in-depth planning of a deep inquiry inside the PLC process to gather interesting data and uncover useful findings. I bore in mind the complexity of data analysis and its implication in the findings, interpretation and report write-ups.

2. Researcher Positionality

I addressed my personal reflexivity regarding my subjectivity, personal interest in the PLC

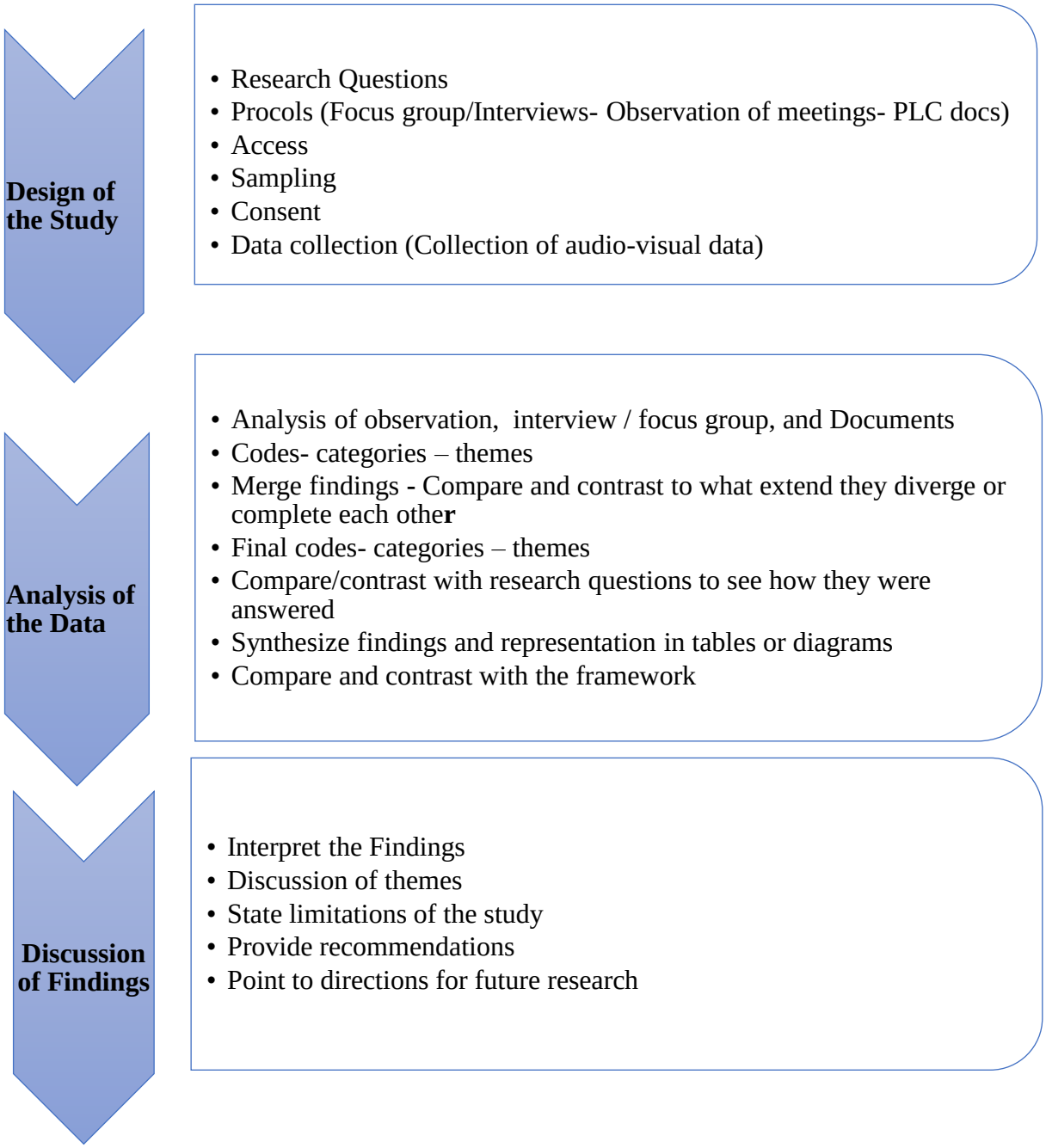

Figure 1. Procedural Diagram

process as well as what I believe makes studying the collaborative culture so important to me when observing behavior, or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2014) without ignoring my personal identity. My career goals are to work as a teacher educator and teacher trainer, and I

previously participated in the teacher development program in my country as a mentee, mentor, and pedagogical adviser. So, I have my own understanding of teacher professional development program strengths and weaknesses. However, I would like to look at the question from multiple perspectives to discover the realities of the stakeholders. My reflexivity helped me mitigate potential negative outcomes of my positionality. I need to consider my values, assumptions and perceptions and once I gained access, I had to negotiate to build trust, and build on participants' experiences for a possible need for triangulation of different data types I will collect. This self-awareness and self-disclosure therefore enabled authentic dialogue with my sample for authentic data collection and interpretation (Lichtman, 2013). I am conscious how my role in the study and my personal background, held potential for shaping my interpretations, the themes I advance and the meaning I ascribe to the data and impact the narrative structure of my dissertation as advised by Creswell (2014).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter is designed for the analysis and presentation of the data collected to better understand the lived experiences of teachers, during the establishment and implementation of their newly designed Professional Learning Community (PLC). The study was conducted in a school district in a semi-rural town in the Midwest from September 2018 to April 2019. It will be called SamaSchool. It is well-known because of its capacity to accommodate a diverse population of K-8 students from all around the world. It is a notorious setting that hosts student teachers from the local university during their clinical placement and their practicum. My participants were three female teachers and a female administrator. Unfortunately, I did not have any male participant (names here are pseudonyms). Margot is the curriculum director and she has experience in teaching and in administration. Ryan B. who taught for 30 years, and Kanada G. who taught for over 15 years also experienced interim administration. The youngest teacher is Julie M. who also taught for 14 years. The three teachers are members of an elementary grade level team sharing the same wing in the building, and the PLC has a multiplicity of learning platforms at the state, county, and district level.

Research Questions

My data collection and analysis methodology for the study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How was the Professional Learning Community at SamaSchool designed?
2. What are teachers' experiences during the planning, implementation, and assessment of PLC activities?
3. How does the design of the PLC impact teachers' motivation, interpersonal relationships, and

professional growth?

Overview of the Chapter

The chapter is divided into four sections representing the themes uncovered during the data analysis as described in chapter III. The interview of an administrator and a focus group of three teachers, combined with observations of team meetings and document analysis enabled a collection of valuable data. The coding of the data aligned with the research questions, led to the process of sequential coding of raw data into preliminary codes, categories and themes (Saldana, 2015), but also according to topics readers might expect to find because of previous literature, bearing in mind unexpected codes (Creswell 2014). This showed great efforts from the team members I studied to collaborate in a very effective way, and also from the administration who tried, under the direction of the superintendent, to encourage effective teacher learning opportunities and staff professional development. However, the data also showed issues in the planning and implementation of the PLC process especially regarding the focus on learning.

The first section of the chapter deals with the overview of the data analysis methodology I used to uncover the findings presented here. In the next sections, I present the findings of each of the research questions by comparing findings from the different data sources using a detailed description of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014), and also the impact on participants' professional lives. Finally, I provide a summary of research question findings as shown by a clear analysis throughout the work and an objective account of findings.

Data Analysis

1. Data Sources.

I conducted this research during the school year 2018-2019, and used different sources to collect data in order to have a better view of the collaborative culture among PLC members. I

observed one ‘PLC meeting’ (because I did not have access to the others. I will come back to this later). However, I was able to observe an elementary grade-level team’s Academic Behavioral Conclusion (ABC) weekly meetings for a semester and to record written and audio field notes; and, when time allowed, I could ask occasional clarification questions. I also conducted document analysis of the professional development topic sign-up sheet and the minutes of the ABC grade level team meetings over the course of a semester. At some point during my data analysis, I had to design a questionnaire (see Appendix G) to complete information about the design, implementation and assessment of the PLC because some information was missing in the data that had already been collected and it was a bit difficult despite my clarification questions, to make connections between the data, the framework and the literature

The majority of my data was collected with interviews: I conducted an hour-long individual interview with the Curriculum Director at the beginning of my data collection and later on, after months of observations, I again conducted another focus group interview which was an hour long as well, with the three elementary grade level team members, in order to understand how things happen in the PLC (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). However, despite my questions and reformulations, the design of the program was not very clear to me and I had to design the aforementioned questionnaire to clarify some aspects of the design principal of professional development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2. Descriptive and Comparative Methods

I thus used descriptive methods to compare and contrast data from the different data sources (documents, interviews, focus group, observations and questionnaire) during the analysis of the data and the interpretation of the findings. I compared the design of the PLC at SamaSchool and its implementation with the framework in DuFour’s et al. (2016). I transcribed

the interview questions and the recordings from the field observations verbatim, and I used descriptive coding (Saldana, 2015) across all the data sources to manually code the raw data from the official documents, the audio data, my observation notes and the minutes of the meetings. I preferred manual coding because I was looking for a better ownership of my work with the manipulation of my data with pen and pencil (Saldana, 2015). I recorded every step in a codebook. I then worked through the preliminary codes and subcodes to have categories and subcategories that I defined. I had a second reader look at the first codes and categories to confirm my findings, and I finally worked through the categories to obtain new concepts and themes that were systematic and interrelated across the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I could therefore uncover the following themes that I used to describe the design, implementation and assessment of SamaSchool PLC in the lived experiences of the team members that I compared with the DuFour et al. (2016) framework.

1. *Theme # 1: SamaSchool PLC activities seem to be more individualized than collaborative.*
2. *Theme # 2: Accountability measures Weigh on the effectiveness of the PLC process.*
3. *Theme #3: SamaSchool PLC has issues in its organization.*
4. *Theme # 4: Assessment is a strong and weak aspect of the PLC design principle.*
5. *Theme # 5: Team members' experience often works as a 'Rescue Dog'.*

DuFour et al . (2016) define a PLC as an ongoing process during which educators work in collaboration over and over to collectively inquire and conduct action research for better student results (See Fig: 2). For them, three Big Ideas drive the work of a PLC: 1. *A focus on learning, 2. a collaborative culture and collective responsibility,* and *3. a result orientation*. This aligns with the four questions, already discussed in previous chapters, that drive the work of PLC team

members that are tied to the essential skills, knowledge and dispositions that every student should acquire as a result of a unit of instruction, and the gathering of evidence of student learning with collectively-developed formative assessments for the units; but also the identification of students who need additional time and support, and the intervention that should follow. Finally, teams should consider extending the learning of the students who already reached the learning targets.

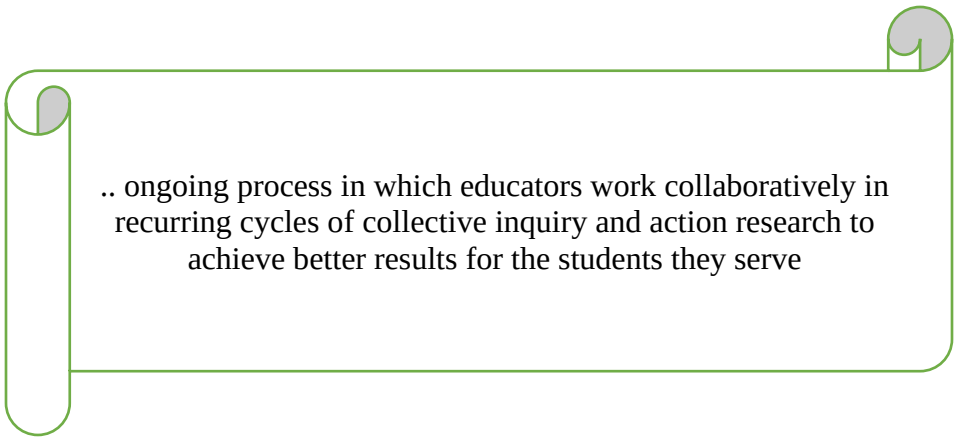

Figure 2. Definition of a PLC (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 10).

Hence the reminder in the continuum of the four pillars of Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals where rest the foundations of a PLC according to DuFour et al.(2016) and that sustain the definition of a clear and compelling purpose for the PLC members. They already show how the planning of the PLC should work. The Mission pillar clarifies the fundamental purpose that school members should agree. The Vision pillar, as they define it, helps members create a compelling, attractive, and realistic future for their school. As for the Value pillar, it clarifies what the collective commitments must be in order to achieve the last pillar Goals that require members to identify specific targets they hope to attain as a result of collective commitment to improve by establishing priorities and timelines. I was therefore looking for these elements of

comparison during my study of at SamaSchool, and the lived experiences of the teachers during the implementation of the different activities of their PLC. Finally, I studied the impact of the PLC on teachers' motivation, interpersonal relationship, and professional growth.

Question# 1. How is The Professional Learning Community Designed at SamaSchool?

This section investigated the design process of SamaSchool PLC.

SamaSchool PLC Design

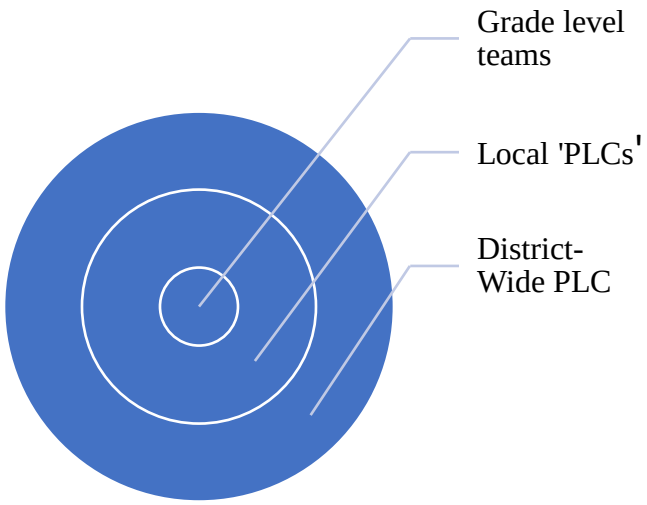

Figure 3. Design of SamaSchool PLC

At Sama school, the professional development program for teachers and staff is varied and rather comprehensive. During the semester long observation sessions, I could measure the importance of teacher and staff learning for the school community. The district established a multitude of collaborative teams for administration, the curriculum committee, teachers, and for other school personnel's improvement of knowledge. Teacher learning was conducted through different types of meetings, with goals as varied as the number of meetings, because of the way the foundation of the PLC was laid out (see fig. 3). I confess that it took me a lot of time before I could make sense of the data I was collecting because of how the different activity types were organized until I uncovered my first theme.

Theme # 1: SamaSchool PLC activities seem to be more individualized than collaborative

During the first few weeks of study of the new PLC process at SamaSchool, I often doubted I understood how activities were set up because a lot of the organization did not align with the literature about the PLC process. DuFour et al. (2016) warn that a PLC is NOT a book club, nor is it a program but rather an ongoing, continuous and never ending process. It is not an occasional event when colleagues meet to complete a task, it is more than just a meeting but rather, for them, "if educators meet with peers on a regular basis only to return to business as usual, they are not functioning as a PLC" (P. 11). That is why I was perplexed to see and hear what I was seeing and hearing. I had the confirmation of my doubts during the interview with the administration. According to Margot, the curriculum director, there are a number of 'PLCs' (in the plural. I will refer to them as 'PLC') embedded in the District-wide PLC (See fig. 3).

> So, our PLCs this year have been designed to meet individual learning goals that our teachers have established during the course of the 2017-18 school year. [..] And so, within the PLCs there will be a facilitator and we will be learning throughout the entire year regarding that particular topic within that PLC. (Margot)

She asserted that the topics came from a needs' assessment conducted by the staff and the needs came from various professional development opportunities they decided to put into the 'PLCs'. I wondered how realistic it can be to attempt to meet the individual learning goals of teachers and where the collective inquiry and action research to improve student result was located. It seemed that, the collective commitment of the Value pillar was missing and with this the collective responsibility of the PLC ensuring that all students learn at the maximum of their ability. At least it appeared that the focus of the monthly 'PLC' was more on teacher learning.

I learned from the different data sources that there are Academics, Behavior, and Conclusion (ABC) meetings, Coaching Days meetings, Training Days, Regional Office of Education (ROE) trainings and an online required training just to name a few of all the required meetings or trainings for teachers and staff. I discovered that goals were different for each of these groups as you will see, but also there were built-in scheduling, timed duration of activities, administrative chosen 'PLC' facilitators, and a variety of activities and assessment plans (when they exist).

The composition of the teams depended theoretically on individual needs and were assigned by the administration depending on the needs' assessment. However, everyone is involved either as an attendee or facilitator since activities are almost always assigned by the administration. The choice of topic or activity is offered following a list of pre-established 'PLCs' topics. A report is often required at the end of each meeting as a form the attendees complete and submit. It is, however, difficult to tie the activities of the different meetings to the idea of a districtwide PLC focused on evidence of student learning that should be addressed via collective inquiry and action research because activities seemed to be more geared towards teacher learning.

The PLC at SamaSchool meets once monthly and/or quarterly and the goal, as I learned from the questionnaire and the interview, was to meet the needs of the district as determined by state mandates and law. During the activities, members discuss specificities such as school report cards, and school needs. In the interview, Margot refers to it as a 'District-wide PLC' as opposed to the 'local PLCs' which turned out to be mere workshops. It is facilitated by the Superintendent, the Curriculum Director, the Dean of Students, Lead Teachers and is implemented with all community members. The duration of the 'District-wide PLC' is an hour

to two after school once a month for half a day, once each quarter. I only had the opportunity to observe one of these meetings.

The activities of the district-wide PLC were implemented by varied teams with different levels of responsibilities. There is a Curriculum Committee that meets once a month to look at the forms submitted by grade level teams about students they teach, regarding behavior and academic data for the month. According to the data from the questionnaire, the curriculum committee looks for trends or concerns in the data from the forms and discusses a plan to address them. For DuFour et al. (2016), this task should be completed by the team members teaching the classes. The Curriculum Committee also discussed state and district mandates, school needs and professional development. They invited staff members to meetings once a month to cascade information in order to keep them up-to-date about requirements. This is also the case for school board meetings, meant simply for communicating new information to the school community members. The Curriculum Committee also organized Grade Level meetings once a semester for a duration of one to two days with representatives from each team. Those grade level meetings involved varied types of team members depending on the staff involved in particular with the students of the grade levels and provide an opportunity to address issues related to the State mandates, the Rainbow Mapping, and the deconstruction of the Standards.

The District-wide PLC meetings, always assigned by the district administration, involved everyone in the building, but mostly teachers, aides, support staff, and administration. Both vertical alignments and horizontal alignment teams are utilized. They sometimes included support personnel such as the office staff, cooks, playground teachers, school personnel, community members, agencies, bus drivers, and custodians. In fact, almost the entire staff participated in these meetings; Refreshments were provided. Activities were generally planned

by the administration and teacher leaders, and community members signed up for specific 'PLCs' at the beginning of the school year on the "Professional Development Topic Sign-up Sheet". The sheet can be accessed online via Google Documents and one can read on top, the information about 'PLCs' and how teachers and staff should complete the assignment. According to Margot, the administration put teams together based upon needs but were teachers really involved in the planning of the activities?

> We have a Continuous Improvement Team [CIT] that meets one time a month, and as the CIT team we determine the sort of needs assessment of our grade level spans.. that these are the topics that we really wanna focus on for this year. (Margot)

The elementary grade level team I had the opportunity to observe for a semester confirmed that they do have a representative in that CIT team. However, this year's representative stated that they "have a problem within [the] CIT group that[they] don't feel safe enough". They believe that freedom of speech did not really exist. This confirms what I believed about the assignment type even though they said that it was useful at some point. Below is an example of the sign-up sheet used to set up the different teams for the 'local PLCs'. The text below, highlighted in bright colors and bold font, opens the Professional Development Sign-up Sheet.

Professional Development Topics

> Please sign up for one….
>
> The goal is that you will choose an area to expand your professional growth. When deciding, consider your IGP[Individualized Graduation Plan] and choose an extended learning opportunity that will help you to grow professionally. Once you

have signed up for ***a PLC*** [emphasis added] you will stay in the same PLC throughout the school year. You only need to sign up one time.

This seems to indicate that almost everything has been assigned from the administration including the types of activities of the 'PLCs'. Members had to follow the guidelines to complete the tasks.

'PLCs' at SamaSchool

For the 2018- 2019 school year, there were seven PLC days where teachers had to meet in their designated 'PLCs'. The first PLC meeting was held at the beginning of the school year for a half school day dedicated to the general information session about the so-called *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) by the Superintendent.

Interviewer: So, it means that you have different PLCs inside the school or is it just a big one?

Margot: No. Ma'am.. We have 8 to 10 different PLCs, so 8 to 10 different learning topics that are going to be going on in our learning communities, that will be going on within the building.

So, it seemed that a PLC is designed for a learning topic and this explains the design of the PLCs and the choice that is offered to members.

Interviewer: How did you set up those PLCs?

Margot: Hum… Teachers… again , based on the needs' assessment we… created a list of… offerings. We provided description for those offerings and the teachers were provided the opportunity to choose where they… the one they think would best fit their needs

What is emphasized here is teacher learning. Teachers and staff were then assigned to register before the deadline of the first date of the districtwide PLC meeting. On D-Day, the whole building as a group had one activity, the *Trauma Informed "House" Activity* as a follow-up to the previous session about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) where they shared out Social Emotional Standards. During the second part of the session, attendees had to break into groups to join the 'PLC' they signed-up for. There were 10 break out session topics for the registered 'PLCs' (see Table 1). These were the possible choices that were offered to teachers for the whole year. As an example, Google classroom attendants would stay in that PLC for the whole school year to learn how to utilize Google Classroom.

Vision and Values, and Goals

According to Ryan B., a very experienced teacher participant, the goals of each PLC was assigned by the administration and facilitated by Margot or the Dean of Students, are "to plan and implement areas of study in order to better meet students' academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs". But for Margot, the curriculum director, the " PLCs this year have been designed to meet individual learning goals that our teachers have established during the course of the previous school year" (forms completed at the end of PD days) they decided to put into PLCs. I noted that for Margot the focus is on teacher learning, for Ryan B. the understanding is that the focus is more on student learning (this aligns more with DuFour et al., 2016, framework). It appeared as though norms and protocols were not collectively constructed during the planning as an important aspect of the foundation of the PLC, and the PLC members are not on the same level of information about everything. Margot asserted: "So the norms and protocols obviously will be different for each PLC, depending on what the PLC needs and *depending on*

that facilitator [emphasis added]. So, the norms will be established during that first meeting".

Table 1.

PLC Meeting activities compared to the definition of a PLC regarding student data use

PLC Topic	Workshop Type (Teacher Learning activity)	Cycle of collective inquiry and action research (Evidence of student learning data use)
Differentiation/Intervention-Best Practices-Round Table	√	
Fountas and Pinnell Gradient (F & P) Refresher and Words Their Way Refresher, Daily 5/Daily3 Training Introduction	√	
Google Training-Basics	√	
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Review-Universal Screener	√	
Pacing Introduction For Special Teachers	√	
Assessment-Continued Work from the Summer-Mastery of Standard and Depth of Knowledge (DOK)	√	
Peer to Peer Model	√	
Resiliency Team	√	
English Language (EL) Cohort	√	
Pre-K-PLC-Pyramid Model Training	√	

However, I learned another story from the focus group. According to them, the team, usually composed of a mix of different grade levels or areas of the building personnel, work

under the facilitator's guidance on *"book studies, [they] reflect, discuss, plan and prepare a plan to meet the district needs"* (Ryan B.). They meet for half a day, or one to two hours after school, under the facilitation of the curriculum director. It appeared as if the administration and the teachers were not on the same level of information regarding the goals of the PLC, because for Margot they 'have *course* [emphasis added] goals and a finished product that [they] are working towards throughout the course of the school year".

DuFour et al. (2016) believe that "if schools and districts limit themselves to the pursuit of attainable goals they run the risk of never moving out of their comfort zones (p. 92). A better strategy, according to DuFour et al. (2016), would be to bear in mind that small steady progress is much better and "in the early stages of building a PLC, celebrating small wins is key to sustaining the effort, and attainable goals are essential of results-oriented small wins" (p.92). This uncovered not only a top-down approach, but also a kind of power dynamic that will be confirmed later as we looked at the collaborative teams and activities that showed how compartmentalized the concept of the PLC was at SamaSchool.

Types of teams

At SamaSchool, there are different types of horizontal, vertical, and logically-linked teams.

1. **The A-B-C grade level.**

These horizontal teams meet weekly to discuss students' academic and behavioral needs, and to inform conclusions of actions to other resource staff and special subject teachers and administration. For DuFour et al. (2016), "[t]he best team structure for improving student achievement is the [..] a team of teachers that teach the same course or grade level"(p.61). If I consider the grade level team I observed and interviewed, it is my opinion that this type of teaming was very successful. However, their grade level team's activities extended to another

logical link team with the support personnel, and Special Education teachers. They can all access the form filled during the ABC meeting on Google Document and provide their input. According to Margot, “that ABC piece is [their] PLCs within that grade level”. This sentence is still unclear to me after my data analysis. She added that there is an ongoing “collaboration piece that occurs [..] all the time”. In fact, I discovered that this was the only real meeting that meets the requirement of a true PLC, as defined by DuFour et al. (2016).

ABC grade level meetings can be facilitated by any of the teachers in that team. They not only collaborate together for the assigned 30-minute weekly meetings, but even beyond to find solutions to issues their students are facing. This also includes teachers who interact with those same students (resource, ESL, music, PE, art, computer lab, library). The grade level teachers meet to discuss and complete a Google document form. They then disseminate their ABC form online so that other teachers and support personnel can read it and add any additional thoughts or information. The form is always assigned by the administration and can be accessed online any time for follow-up. It is very interesting to note that the strongest culture of collaboration happens within that mix of grade level teachers and logical link team, at least for the participating team.

2. **The monthly meetings and training days.**

They happen once a month or quarterly for usually half a day or an hour after school. The goals are for teachers to reflect and respond to ongoing training and to collaborate on identified areas of professional development. Anyone among the school personnel, the administration, or community members who has an area of expertise can be a facilitator. They are always assigned and given the opportunity to facilitate (administration or designated teachers or “experts” on the topic), to share or train other members (grade level, or mixed grouping, or lower, middle and

upper grade together) including aides and staff. The topic can be on any new information, strategies and procedures, curriculum plans, or technology to name just a few. That's where both vertical and horizontal alignments work for better student results. Training days however are different from coaching days.

3. Coaching days.

They are organized to create the opportunity to work with novice teachers, (usually non-tenured) under the facilitation of the curriculum director, mentor teachers and, experienced but non-tenured teachers as well as veteran teachers, to provide them with the needed support, information, and professional development in order to enhance their work skills, help them to be successful and retain them in the field of education. That is another way to stop teacher attrition and turnover in the district. This is the assigned platform for classroom observation and debriefing, so that new teacher can reflect on the planning, preparation and implementation of their teaching practices. Novice teachers are coached on how to set goals, ask questions, and discuss issues while the mentor teachers help them plan and address needs. This constitutes a four-year long intensive mentoring program.

4. The county regional office of education (ROE) meeting.

It provides professional development opportunities for staff, support staff, and administration in areas determined by the state mandates, districts, and teachers' needs. The ROE meeting occurs once a year for a duration of three hours, Anyone with expertise in any determined area can facilitate the session (teachers, support staff, community agencies etc.) about anything from retirement information for veteran teachers, local community resources for teachers, evaluation process, behavior management, etc. Here also the sessions begin with a motivational speaker, breakfast, networking, and then attendees break into a multitude of

workshops / presentations from which teachers can choose. Support employees like cooks, bus drivers, and custodians are not involved in this meeting/workshop. Attendees complete the state required Professional Development evaluation form at the end of the session.

5. **Online training.**

This is an area of usually 10-15 online required trainings each year, that are 25 minutes to an hour long and that all teachers, administrators and support staff must complete. School personnel are required to take them each semester on their own time and convenience. An online training has a slideshow and/or a video with a test afterwards as a state requirement. Trainees must receive 80% or higher on each test or retake the training and the test until they get an 80% on such things as Bloodborne Pathogens, Epi-pens for students who have severe allergies, asthma, sexual harassment, head injuries and concussions, mandated reporting, child abuse and neglect, etc. because, as Margot states, they are "focusing schoolwide on resiliency and trauma." Since the meeting is a state requirement, the assessment is required, and a certificate is delivered to the trainees to keep in their file once they obtain the required grade and the superintendent is informed of the completion of the training.

6. **Informal ongoing teacher collaboration.**

It is an important part, if not one of the most important and effective aspects of the cultural collaboration at SamaSchool PLC. We will see below that teacher learning and support most certainly occurs during both formal and informal collaboration but more in the informal ongoing collaboration because it is initiated by teachers themselves and related to their personal and immediate needs, and the pressure of mandates and top-down assignments no longer exists. On the contrary, mutual support, mutual respect, responsibility, and offer and acceptance of

spontaneous help, and trustworthiness alleviate the weight of accountability, judgement and vulnerability.

We can therefore assert that the PLC activities are varied and numerous but if they are all important for teacher learning and, as a consequence, for student learning, they seem to be rather compartmentalized workshops. It is sometimes difficult to determine how the training, coaching days or other mandatory training days assigned and scheduled by the administration connects to the building of a culture of collaboration where team members work "in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they

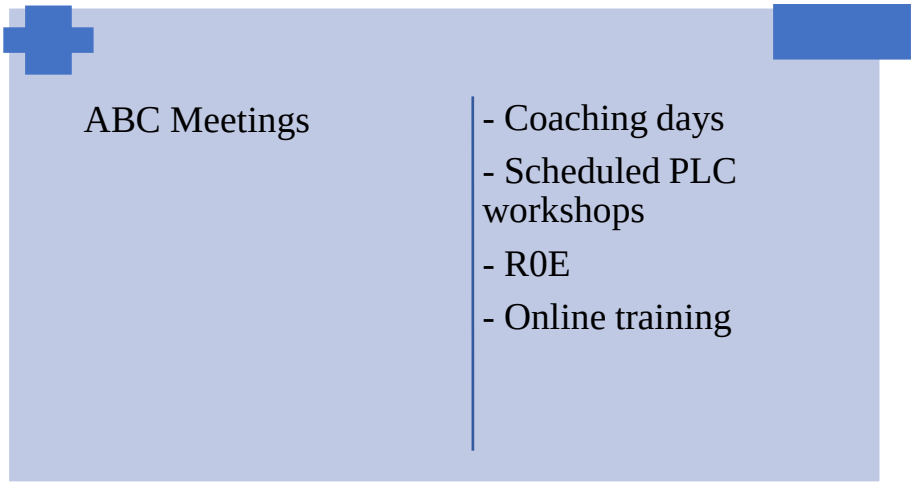

Figure 4. Use of student data in collective inquiry and action research

Note: The use of student data in collective inquiry and action research most probably happens during the ABC process.

serve" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 10). The action research piece is missing in most of the activities except in the ABC meetings that are followed by grade level team's ongoing reflection and collaboration, or in the informal teacher collaboration (see Fig.4).

Again, it looks as though the protocols were not established collectively, and teachers seem to be going through all these activities as a way to complete an assignment. The collective commitment that should prevail to lay a solid foundation for their PLC is missing. "All steps of

the PLC process are intended to provide a teacher team with transparent evidence of student learning so that members can determine which instructional strategies are working and which are not" according to DuFour et al. (2016). We are going to see if going through this multiplicity of assignments will allow teacher to build a culture of collaboration that can allow them to meet the goals of a PLC that is to collaborate so that they can ensure that all students learn at their highest potentials with the three Big Ideas of a focus on student learning, a collaborative culture and collective responsibility of team member, and a student result orientation.

Question # 2. What are Teachers' Experiences During The Planning, Implementation and Assessment of PLC Activities?

As a reminder, according to DuFour et al. (2016), for the PLC process to be effective, it requires a culture of collaboration that is simultaneously tight and loose. It should empower, encourage educators' creativity and innovation, and give them the opportunity to make important decisions as they work towards teacher and student learning. In other words, the process itself trusts educators, but also stresses the accountability of their decision-making as the people responsible of the team's success and therefore students' better achievements.

Their first responsibility is to analyze evidence of student learning in order to move to the next responsibility to develop strategies to improve what needs to be. The tight aspects of the PLC process are not discretionary, according to DuFour et al. (2016), and are inclusive of all school personnel and adherence is compulsory: collaboration, with collective responsibility and commitment. They work interdependently in teams to achieve common targets with unit plans collectively designed, and formative assessment to gather evidence of student learning; the school creates support and intervention systems to ensure that students receive the support they need in a timely and systematic way; and the team members are informed so that collective

actions are taken to improve teaching practices. But the responsibility shifted at SamaSchool where PLC activities are almost always assigned by district administrators for the sake of training teachers to meet state mandates and laws as we can see both in the documents analyzed and in the interviews. However, some activities are initiated by teachers or/and submitted to the administration for approval according to their teams' needs.

Theme # 2: Accountability measures weigh on the effectiveness of the PLC process.

Teams of teachers at SamaSchool are somewhat involved in the planning phase with the forms they complete at the end of PD days, but decision-making regarding the implementation of the PLC process almost always comes from the top (see fig. 5). As a result, the focus group participants stated that they would rather experience a bottom-up initiative than a top-down one because they believe that they know more about their students and their personal and team needs than does the administration.

> And I feel like the things that happen bottom up are steady and growing and respected like Art, like PBIS (the Positive Behavior Intervention Support). It's organized and run by teachers. The data is collected by teachers and shared out. And so, it's something that's been here for years, and it's stuck and the kids understand the expectations, for all of us are the same, as far as walking down the hall and bathroom behavior and things like that. So, the things that the teachers are in control of I think go much better than the other thing that comes from.. and that's the story and that's true anyway.. (Kanada G.)

This summarizes the perception of how the program works and how the team I observed responded about the planning and implementation of the PLC program. As we already showed, the majority of the program is mainly composed of assignments for the sake of meeting state

mandates. District administrators' initiatives are implemented with the choice of activity types and scheduling (see fig. 5). A PLC's focus, according to DuFour, should be on results, not activities. Furthermore, school improvement decisions should neither be exclusively driven by state or district mandates (top-down) nor left to the individual teams (bottom-up). On the one hand, top-down decision-making can be more effective at times, but it does not succeed in generating the deep understanding of the team's commitment to improvement initiatives. On the other hand, the bottom-up approach proved to be unsuccessful as evidenced by research (DuFour et al., 2016). But then how tight is 'tight' and how loose is 'loose'? Finding the right balance may be more challenging than PLC members can anticipate. But at SamaSchool, indeed, both aspects exist at different degrees and with different practical applications, and we are going to see how team members feel about the entire process, and if the tight and loose elements of the PLC process influence their success as a team or if, on the contrary, this hinders effective collaboration.

Positive aspects of the setting-up of the culture of collaboration

SamaSchool has a very strong mentoring program that runs for four intense years and allows the administration and staff to work on resiliency in order to ensure teacher retention, and growth. The team I observed was composed of three female teachers. All of them were veteran teachers and very experienced in teaching and collaboration. Two of the teachers experienced interim administration positions when turnover of principals made the position vacant for some time and they filled it. So, they have a particular perception of how administrative support should work since they have been in both positions for years. Therefore, they have a wide experience either from different schools, administrations, or from collaborative teams, school community or parent teacher relationships. According to Ryan B., their grade level team is a solid team because

they “all communicate well.” They demonstrated the importance of staying in contact at all times even beyond their professional time.

Figure 5. Accountability Impact on the Design of the PLC

> [W]e keep in daily contact, we meet weekly, we all touch base throughout the day. I think we all recognize our strengths and weaknesses in ourselves and each other, and then we try to balance that, and no one is criticized for having strengths or weaknesses. It's.. I feel like we all embrace that and that makes us a solid team.

My field notes indeed show great invaluable benefits of collaboration, perpetual positive communication, mutual support and mutual respect between the team members, but beyond the teachers, the students also were embraced regardless of the teacher. This team made every opportunity to build strong relationships between members and students. Ryan B. stated:

> And what I liked the best is we each have our own classroom, but we take on each other's students as if they are our own. And we try to develop relationships with kids… like if you spot a kid that needs more relationship than just their one teacher, then we kind of support each other in the hallways.. and transition kids. And I've got some of their kids on a little behavior plans in my room and then…

we're always checking back in with each other. What works best for this kid. I noticed this kid was down. What helps him?

This is how they gather evidence of student learning and take collective action for the improvement of the student's well-being and results. I noticed during my observation a high dedication towards all students who gave this back so heartfully, with questions and smiles to other members of the team, who were not their teacher. It was just emotional at times! And doors were open for all teachers and students as well, as one of the teachers stated:

Kanada G.: Other people know to come! And in fact, [addressing Ryan B.] yesterday you have to brag on you. I passed your student in the hallway who was on his way to the dentist and I said: 'Oh! I saw your dad picking you up' and he goes 'Yeah I'm going to the dentist. My teacher got me money to get my tooth fixed'.

When she said that, the whole team celebrated the event by applauding the teacher in spontaneity. I found this simply wonderful for the team members to care about each other's students, and for the teacher to even invest her own money in kids' health and well-being. This valuable dedication also profits other teachers from other teams especially novice ones. Solidarity was really the master word in this team. Team members supported each other, emotionally but also professionally by sharing tips for behavior issues, documents, resources found on the internet, books that might be helpful but also, issues that should be avoided when using a lesson in the required textbooks that can be confusing. There was a strong mutual respect, mutual appreciation and the recognition of every individual team member's values and abilities. So, self-respect, self-protection and team protection was easy to share for solidarity and the culture of collaboration they were working to improve at all time.

And since we're so willing to share.. if you look at how many years of experience

> everybody has and brings to the table.[..] So, because there are so many years of experience here, and even from different places. Right! Because we do collaborate and share so well, so many different ideas can be brought to the table, that really do support our kiddos in ways that we probably can't even think about. So, it's really nice to have the different heads together. (Julie M.)

That particular team was very strong and dedicated to successful collaboration for better student results. We will see later how experience plays an important part in the strength of this. Personality and mutual trust and efforts to stay a solid team make everything smooth. During the planning of the ABC meetings and during the meetings themselves, no real classroom exists, it was all about the students who need help and how to help, be effective whatever the concern (academic or behavioral), and they all believe that before getting out of the meeting their conclusion should be

> like a wrap up of what we spoke about it [..] what we need to kind of get in place and plan for what to be ready for any other loose ends that might be out there that we have to make sure that we focus on and address. Not forget about it. (Julie M.)

The level of individual involvement is very high as I could witness and when I surprised them with a question: "Do you feel that everybody in the team is involved in the process?", their answer was spontaneous and passionate.

> Ryan B.: Absolutely!
>
> Julie M.: Yeah!
>
> Kanada G.: Absolutely!

The same excitement also transpired through Margot's words when discussing team involvement during activities and through the day. "I feel that there is an ongoing collaboration piece that occurs. I mean, they are talking about the kids all the time.. all the time. Yeah!". This is due to the team's same visions, values and goals about teaching their students and the team solidarity, and the valuable efforts members put into building strong ties, mutual trust, mutual appreciation and healthy sharing. This cannot be achieved without a sense of humanity, solidarity and humility they collectively cultivate. I value their vision that makes the trio a very stable team that strengthens their self-efficacy because they feel unanimously backed up at all times, and all team members understand the importance of adherence to team's values and goals (DuFour et al., 2016). The ongoing reflection about teams' efforts and ties, students' needs and achievements, but also on how to build the same ties with the administration in terms of support, trust and acceptance of views and initiatives is really great.

They say that there was no leader in their team even though after a few hours of observation my experience of teacher leadership clearly pointed out the leader. But humility, respect and sense of strong mutual appreciation prevented them from designating a leader. I liked their shared-responsibility in what's going on in the team and with students. They all believe in learning new things to better understand new textbooks, teaching practices and they would devote time, effort, and personal money in this, sharing resources and warning team members about possible pitfalls of one book or the other. They make it a point to discuss ways to improve again and again how they teach, how they support each other, and how they support kids and their family. A great example to follow indeed! The awareness of the importance of members' involvement does really strengthen relationships inside the team, even though as we can anticipate, not everything is smooth in the newly started PLC process even for this team, due to

design issues and accountability measures, despite the consideration of loose and tight elements of the PLC, as advised by DuFour et al. (2016). Newness and lack of balance between tight and loose elements bring inevitable issues

SamaSchool PLC Program Planning and Implementation Issues

Theme #3: SamaSchool PLC has issues of organization.

DuFour et al. (2016) contend that

> If teachers are to work together collaboratively to clarify the essential learning for their courses or grade levels, write common assessments, and jointly analyze the results, they must overcome the fear that they may be exposed to their colleagues and principal as ineffective. (p. 71)

This can happen only when the foundation of the PLC is well-laid, and the collective commitment is agreed upon by means of collectively defined norms and protocols by all members.

1. Planning.

Reviewing the program design showed that activities are varied but focused on administrative goals. Listening to the team members and Margot, we can see that if teachers' goals were to improve professionally in order to carry out successful teamwork to increase students' results, the administration would need to focus on the same goals in addition to meeting state mandates. That's why the design, planning, and most activities are assignments from the top. Mastery of state standards with a finished product is an activity that should increase teachers' effectiveness and student achievement but, as Margot admits by the end of the interview, the planning and implementation of that PLC needs improvement because the choice of the facilitators was initiated by her, instead of seeking a consensus on who would be the

facilitator. Having the team leaders and team members all adhere and commit to the PLC mission values and goals because they have a shared knowledge of why they should embrace the PLC process should be a goal.

> Curriculum Director: I have taken the steps right to go to [experts in their areas] and say hey…would you be willing to facilitate the group? [..] we really need you. [..] I just knocked on the door like this (knocks on the table) on occasion they just look overwhelmed and I look at them and .. 'Hey, I am really overwhelmed right! [..] just can't do it right now'…. we have to honor that and say.. 'OK Quit it'. (laughter)

Team leaders are supposed to act as liaisons between the team and the administration but how will they do so if they do not have the same shared knowledge about why it is so important to collaborate as a team; no wonder they often find it difficult to have all members adhere with conviction to the team's efforts. There are very high expectations for teachers, but the conversation between the PLC members and decision-makers is not always effective even though it was repeated many times that the aim was to make the discussion table a 'safe place'. During the interview with the grade level team, it was confirmed that real issues exist between the CIT team and the team representatives because that safe space was not well established. When I asked if at any time during workshops she noticed that some teachers were reluctant to participate in the activities, she stated:

> Oh no! [during a workshop on state standards], what I did notice is… and a frustration.. that I had, was that.. I wasn't always seeing what I was hearing.[..] Whenever the coach would dig a little deeper, I would hear responses as the evaluator, no way... we got to come to the table .. we got to put it out there. [..] No. my goal is that.. we are able to scaffold, we are able to vertically align, horizontally

> align in a way that we don't have gaps in the curriculum. An being honest, coming to the table and just throwing it out there.[…]But we have to be honest at the table .. and if you don't know what something means. [..] I think that, that's where the hang up was..

According to DuFour et al. (2016), building a culture of collaboration requires an understanding from the administration that it is not simply a task of bringing random adults together around a topic of discussion. The best strategy would be to have the members understand the goal(s), embrace the proposal, endorse it they feel they can live with it, agree not to take any action that can sabotage it and have a majority of the members support it. Then, team leaders and members would not feel that it was more than they can handle. The feeling of "Big Brother" watching you is natural when power dynamics exist, but when a consensus is found, then even those who oppose it will buy into it more easily, especially if during the improvement process, evidences can be showcased. Caring for teachers and building trust should not be just theoretical. It should transpire in the design process and be reflected in the assessment of activities (DuFour et a., 2016) and the design process should be both top-down AND Bottom up to be totally inclusive. It would be better to try to understand what is happening instead of denying that issues exist. Planning PLC activities is a human thing and should be seen as one, with imperfections to work out, and successes to celebrate and magnify, especially when administration's and teachers' needs are different even though theoretically their goal is better student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Setting up the program to meet state mandates will position the administration goals first, mainly because of the focus on data and accountability.

2. Conflict or Issues / Goals.

Setting up the foundation of a new PLC can be difficult because of all the things that must be

considered. The foundations of Sama School PLC seem to show contradictory processes regarding the issues at stake and the goals the administration sets for the PLC. This creates a series of questions one can ask oneself when comparing the actions taken by the administration, DuFour et al. (2016) framework, and the PLC target. Is there choice when topics come as an assignment from the top? Are the choices of the administration aligned to the needs of the teachers? These are some of the questions to be discussed later.

> any time you give people choice [..] just like giving students choice [..] It helps to… further to be buying [..] and so by having eight to 10 different choices for people [..] I really sensed it make excitement for our staff [..] Because this is the first time that we have actually created these kinds of PLCs [and] they were actually been able to choose the content for the year and tie it to their IGPs [..] So, I sensed a little bit of excitement about it [..]I am excited about it. (Laughter)[..] I literally have never seen anybody say no to me.. (laughter).

3. Teams.

Margot, as the facilitator of the PLC process, admitted that there were some issues with tenured teachers who stayed in their comfort zone even though there were aspects of best practices that needed updates or improvement. There are three different types of teams: level grade, logical links and interdisciplinary (DuFour et al., 2016). As a result of high teacher turnover, there are many new teachers in the building, so some teachers needed more training and professional development than others through mentoring. Many needed training or updates in the mastery of new state standards. So, the training sessions were really necessary.

The team I observed and interviewed was an elementary-level grade team of three middle-age women who easily found their own tempo because they were all seasoned teachers. They

realized that there were issues with administrative initiatives in terms of feasibility and usefulness. Top down decision-making exacerbated personal responsibility, the feeling of unsafety and loneliness, and reduced self-confidence and the possibility of spontaneous team building at times. So, their teaching experience played a difference compared to other teams with more novice teachers. The team is very solid because they understand that mutual trust, mutual support and team member protection is a must. They created their own safe environment by agreement, and all team members adhered to that organization because they endorsed the process that matched their goals and needs. They even know when and how to request more flexibility in the scheduling of weekly activities and to come up with their own strategies when possible. Their answer to my question regarding how they use their 45 minutes planning time was: "We actually had to tweak it [..] *We had it look like an hour on paper* [emphasis added]". (Kanada G.)

The experienced teachers who are more aware of issues related to the organization, knew how to work together to find their way and make their work easier, while accomplishing the administrative paperwork related to the requirements. They found a consensus in their team, but it is not known whether other teams were able to do so. The participating team asserted that "[they]'ve been requesting them to be a little more flexible" (Kanada G). Do team members and administrators have the same understanding of flexibility? As Ryan B. states, one thing is consistent in the conversation. Some teams are experiencing "growing pains" .

4. Decision-Making and Power Dynamics.

The administration typically expects a "finished product" from the groups to present to district officials, who also need to account for their work and align to the county and state mandates. This establishes a need to control schedules (online shared google documents, planning time, coaching time, PLC meetings, ABC meetings, training time etc.). Scheduling

activities is really valuable and can be considered as part of the tight elements of the PLC. Margot was proud to assert that SamaSchool is really awesome in the capacity of creating time for collaboration; time is built into the schedule, the PLC utilizes the time fully, there is nothing that is going to interrupt it, it's dedicated and vital. This is a very important component of DuFour's PLC format (2016) as he encourages district leaders to work with teams in creating time for collaboration by considering real-world constraints. However, too much control can hinder the collective work towards that goal. For example, novice teachers needed to seek permission from administrators before seeking help from more experienced teachers. Margot explained that "when they need something like [working with more experienced peer], they would come to me and say [..] 'I need to work with someone that can help me in this area.. can I go visit this room? Can I go visit that room? " However, the team I interviewed found it unfair to push new initiatives on novice teachers. For example, they suggested changing the scheduling of the new initiative of student-led teacher parent conferences because of issues of feasibility and usefulness. Ryan B. explained their initiatives:

> We have administrators wanting us to meet weekly and we find that we're repeating the same thing because things don't change in four more days."[..] So, If I have a little Bobby who has a behavior problem, I probably need to build a relationship with him. The following week, instead of ABC meeting that 30 minutes is his and mine

The teams have to wait for approval before being able to implement any change**.** She added: **"**So, we talked about an action week and a planning week, and an action week and a planning meeting. And we'll see if they let us do that." Margot asserted being open to flexibility and this was confirmed by the team who agreed that administration rarely says no to their initiatives

5. Meetings: Norms and protocols.

The team I observed was solid and experienced so as to avoid issues of implementation. However, other teams did not have the same opportunities and Ryan B. pointed that they "were experiencing growing pains" because of a lack of focus on the teams' interests in improving the learning experiences of their students. Despite the good intent of the administration, the focus on organizational issues and the implementation of administration assignments seemed to frustrate some teams. However, research seems to indicate this happens frequently.

DuFour et al. (2016) argues that when setting up a PLC, members should "[r]emember that it is what you do that matters, not what you call it" (p.52). For them, the "process of clarifying purpose, vision, collective commitments, and goals is non-linear, nonhierarchical and non-sequential" (p. 52). When I asked Margot how teams' norms and protocols through which they were going to reach the goals of the PLCs were identified, she replied, " …norms and protocols obviously will be different for each *PLC* depending on what the PLC needs, *and depending on that facilitator* [emphasis added]. So, the norms will be established during that first meeting [..] by the facilitator and the group." This could possibly limit the choices of team members at times. Indeed DuFour et al. (2016) stated that "we cannot make commitments on behalf of others. We can only make it for ourselves" (p.52). According to DuFour et al. the norms and protocols should be the teams', and be established as a collective action in order to create a culture of self-efficacy within a collective power and for a collective involvement.

Unfortunately, this was often lacking in some teams because of turnover and lack of experience of newcomers. One of my participants asserted, I think we're fortunate that we all are seasoned teachers. We have experience. We're not guessing.." (Ryan B.). She compared what is happening in their current team with what she experienced in a previous one where personal

interest was prevailing. She narrated anecdotes of issues she experienced with other grade levels within the building when it was hard at times because people who would do such things as writing a grant to go on a field trip but only for their class. A particular teacher really enjoyed getting kudos for writing the grant, for recognition, her kids were happy that was only what mattered to her. She remembers: "my kids were saying things like 'I wish I was in that class'.

Ryan B. recounted another example of how the culture of collaboration can be hampered in a PLC. She remembers sitting at a table with a group of kindergarten teachers and one of the teachers broke down crying because she had gingerbread men hanging up in the hallway. She and the other kindergarten teachers thought they were cute. The result was:

> she was crying because we stole her idea and… she… I totally blanked out and couldn't focus on the conversation.[..] And like people kept talking and voices were getting loud. I'm like 'wait a minute, wait a minute. Are we talking about gingerbread people?' And like … I'm like. 'My kids saw that and wanted to do it. You should see this as a compliment!' Like… (Ryan B.)

This often is the case when the foundations of the PLC are not well-laid. When collaboration and the collective commitment become a challenge, then norms and protocols exist mostly on paper. This often is the case when the foundations of the PLC are not well-laid.

The team did complain about what happens in meetings: "I get really grumpy in meetings when one team member of a grade level puts down one of their teammates (laughter) .. because that's happened to me a lot."(Ryan B.). Committing to the teams' norms and being honest to team members, especially for novice teachers, may be difficult when protocols are not agreed upon by the teams. This competition between the various teams was evident when the participating team had to ask a resource person to stop calling them the 'Dream Team' to avoid

jealousy and animosity from other teams when their student results went up after teams' efforts. Julie M. asserted that this top-down approach caused the teams to "throw each other under the bus". Another example of the top-down initiatives was, as Ryan B. stated, "a very strong heavy push from an administrator, that this is what they wanted [directives]. And it was evident that, that's what we're supposed to choose. So, people chose it."

She added, " I don't think new teachers should take on new curriculum, new setting, new students, and new initiatives, I think that's too much.. too much!" Issues between the CIT team and representatives of teams who should serve as a liaison between the grade level and the CIT team do exist because of personality issues. They complain that sometimes the administration's reaction does not ease communication regarding opinions, use of time, or protection of teachers in the building.

> we may get a chewing out by our superintendent about our opinions. And to me you're punishing people for sharing what they really think and their opinions. And I think that shuts people down. (Ryan B.)

This does not allow novice teachers and non-tenured teachers to constructively voice their thoughts. As DuFour et al. (2016) puts it, it then becomes 'co-blaboration' not collaboration. The reaction of the team I observed could often be professional and responsible because of tenure and this year representative's position is understandable.

> So, I usually… I am a veteran, I'm tenured, I don't care. I take a risk and I say what I want to say but I can honestly tell you even some of our tenured teachers will not cross that line and that's sad. (Ryan B.)

Standing up for other team members or other teachers in the building that are experiencing frustration and dare not say anything is a personal decision to take, but not everyone can do that. She added:

> I mean we teach our students don't be a bystander when there's a bully and yet we can't even do it amongst our own staff. So, to me we have a problem within our CIT group that we don't feel safe enough because all leave the meeting.. I'll say something, and I'll have three people come in my room and say; 'thank you for saying that!'. I am like 'you guys started talking. You get to take a risk'. You know. Because what it does is, that puts me in a negative light. And it's not a safe place to stand alone.(Ryan B.)

This is an example of shared frustration, issues of shared leadership, but also an example of loneliness in the fight for teachers' rights. I heard a type of pledge to collective actions so that conditions change.

> Ryan B.: But I also am not of the nature to just sit there and not say anything and neither is Kanada. If she believes something she's going to share it, but I will say you know like we've brought up the issue of time and then the following week everybody got chewed out for that..
>
> Kanada: You get scolded!
>
> Ryan B.: You get scolded!
>
> Kanada G.: 'You need to use your time more wisely'(rolling eyes in dismay)
>
> Ryan B.: As if we don't use our time wisely!.. So, to me it's like not acknowledging that people are working hard here.. and that we don't play during our planning time.. and that we're coming on weekends and that Kanada and I

> are here.. and Julie are here till five o'clock most evenings. So, to me we have trust and we have relationship and collaborate here, but you have to feel safe to have [trust and relationship] in the bigger environment [district wide PLC].

But a reason Margot gave is understandable and omnipresent in schools: Funding and time issues. Although they follow the advice of DuFour et al. (2016) by providing teachers with the time to meet during their contractual day, time issues added to frustration and a feeling of unsafety that are obstacles for them to meet and discuss effectively.

6. Issues With Time.

At SamaSchool, all meetings are built into the regular school schedule: planning time, ABC meeting, coaching days, PD with the mentoring program, etc. but this is not enough for ongoing collaboration with the commitment to team's success. The administration tries to give the staff time to talk but teachers do not always believe there is enough time for true collaboration. For them that collaboration is an agreed upon personal commitment and they go for it, but they believe they do not have enough time for their ABC meeting (30 minutes), they do not have enough time for their teacher-parent conferences, and they use their lunch break as an opportunity to keep the conversation going. In fact, when I asked them what the weakness of their team was, they all answered in unison "TIME". In reality the lack of time is the main reason why they are unable to draw a line between their personal and professional lives. Because of personal involvement, they touch base as needed (on weekends and breaks, at night, early in the morning etc.). So, if they think of something over the weekend they just text each other. Of course, ongoing commitment increases the workload and lessens time for personal lives. This is extremely challenging and frustrating at times even though they know how important and useful this is for them and for their students' achievement. They needed to create their own time for

collaboration out of their personal time.

In alignment with DuFour et al. (2016), the administration built resources into the schedule to provide PLC teams with time to collaborate by creating common planning time, parallel scheduling, shared classes and shared group activities, events and testing, but they did not work on banking extra time. The team I observed was great in having initiatives and working on how to bank time for better team collaboration:

> We actually had to tweak [our planning time] because what happened in the couple of years ago is we chose a time on a Wednesday when we had a half hour. and then we transition kids to another special and a half hour or so[..] while an ABC meeting'... It could last 20 minutes, it could last an hour, it could last.. and we felt like we were giving up too much of our planning time to spend on that ABC meeting. So, we had to really…we decided if we pick a shorter time, we will.. we'll be able to get in and get out and then leave more time on Wednesdays for planning or follow up. So, we've had to… like limit ourselves because we could talk (laughter) for a long time. (Kanada G)

The team I worked with had ingenious ways to create their extra time for better collaboration and achievements. I was not able to know how other teams go about creating extra time for collaboration though. Experience was what helped this team know what the issue was and how to come up with the best solutions. We will see later that they developed great initiatives and because of their students' achievement that showed that they were meeting requirements and state mandates, they were able to work with the administration to get considerations.

7. Assessment.

For DuFour et a. (2016), the third Big Idea of a PLC is a result orientation and "educators in

a PLC focus on results [evidence of student's results]" (p. 12)

Theme # 4: Assessment as a strong and weak aspect of the PLC design principle.

The result orientation allows them to recognize and work towards having all their efforts ultimately assessed through improvement of their students' achievements. Even for other models of the PLC process, such as the one of Peter Senge, the rationale for building a learning community should revolve around dramatically improved results. Therefore, for a PLC to be successful there should be a collective ongoing formative assessment of the results and collective plans to address what needs to be for students who are lagging behind but also by keeping up with students that hit the collective targets. This should be a global concerns of course for team members during the collaborative process. Let us see how SamaSchool PLC works to address this.

a. Student assessment.

Student assessment has been widely researched in the PLC literature and usually turns out to have yielded positive outcomes (Dufour et al., 2016), we therefore did not focus on it in this study. However, during the whole study, assessment which is the third big idea of the PLC process was present in almost every conversation. There is evidence that the focus on students' results is dealt with very well at SamaSchool PLC. Training sessions are organized for teachers to work on state standards and update their knowledge in order to implement the mandates in their daily practices. The team I observed worked on their teacher created benchmarks making the most of administrative flexibility to schedule their tests as wisely as they believed useful. They also worked professionally on the ongoing evaluation of their benchmarking tools or periodicity, and reflected on student achievement in order to plan follow-up of the student assessments and steady and successful intervention plans for students who needed additional

help taking into account behavioral issues and also students who were high achievers and who need to keep on learning while intervention sessions are organized for their classmates who needed help. SamaSchool PLC has what DuFour et al. (2016) call the most powerful tool in the PLC arsenal: frequent and common formative assessment. Therefore, I believe that this team's data use is optimal and as a result, their students' results went up and they proudly celebrated their success. However, they sometimes did not like how the administration used the data which will be discussed later.

b. Assessment of the PLC process.

When the team's focus was on improving students' results, as the document analysis and the interviews showed, the administration's focus also was on students' results and served as a means to meet state mandates. Participating team members did not believe that the way the administration talked about their success was the best way to get other teams to follow the model. On the contrary, calling them the 'dream team' in front of others made them uncomfortable and may have hindered cohesion between teams, and exacerbated jealousy and foster a desire to compete in a negative way which would not contribute to horizontal or vertical collaboration of teams. Furthermore, they believed that there should also be more of an assessment of the administrative initiatives and team efforts that could improve their collective work. They also would like to see an assessment of team initiatives in order to adopt them into the improvement process of personal results that is measured through improved student achievement. This aligns with DuFour's et al. (2016) statement that teams should "formally evaluate [their] adherence to team norms and the effectiveness of [their team] at least twice a year" (p. 70). Nowhere in the design principle of the PLC at SamaSchool is this evident. For example, the team believed that administrative initiatives regarding textbooks should be assessed

and they should be given time to work on them and improve them by allowing them to reflect, choose and modify what needs to be modified to meet their needs.

> So, to me you get a chance to reflect when they don't keep changing things like [..] when I first moved to second grade *I went through three Reading Series in three years* [emphasis added] and I was exhausted with it. I was just like.. I can't do it! But I think we're fortunate that we all are seasoned teachers we have experience we're not guessing. (Ryan B)

The document analysis and the interviews revealed that the only assessment of the PLC activities was the PD reflection form the state requires at the end of the ROE workshop once year, and a state form that is required to determine the effectiveness of the District-wide PLC. However, teachers keep a personal reflection sheet for the collaboration piece and activities of the different 'PLCs' but no assessment tool exists. On the other hand, the administration requires a 'finished product' and almost all of the meetings require a report. It is unclear what the administration does with these reports apart from having evidence that the assignment was completed. Local PLCs and Training days do not require a report. This is corroborated by the excerpts below.

> Interviewer**:** Do you have any ways of assessing that adherence to the group..[..] Do you have any ways to measure that?
>
> Margot: Well I think that you can…I mean we are always looking at the program… always assessing the program… and what we can do differently… to tweak the program to make the program better…so I mean. ..like…you know.. we.. we will do evaluation of the programs.
>
> Interviewer: Uh hum…How do you do that?

Margot**:** Hum.. we have a questionnaire.. that we.. we will send out through.. either.. Google Docs or… just sit down with them and do a lunch talk.. so.. hum.. I mean. .we've done that through many.. CIT.. very open.. I mean.. we throw things out .. and it's a pro/con.. a safe place..

In order to acquire more information of the assessment process and the use of Google Docs for the PLC assessment process, I asked:

Interviewer: If you work in a PLC [on] how to use google in the classroom, how will you assess at the end of the PLC that your goals were met?

Margot: So… not sure yet.. to be honest with you.. we have agendas.. so, we have contents that we know we would have taught each month, [..] ..but yet … a finished product… or a… yeah a mindset of OK this is what I learned, and this is how I can apply it to the classroom..

I understood that this had not been in the planning phase yet and Margot added: " hum.. I think that it's something we gonna have to work towards with the facilitators, the CIT that I have to.. I hear what you are saying". At this time of the interview, I appreciated her honesty and humility as she was beginning to reflect on the process. I believe that this was the most interesting aspect of the conversations. After a year of PLC activities, she was beginning to reflect on the process, and was becoming aware of some missing pieces of the puzzle. She confessed : "I am just not.. real sure.. other than those groups that I know the facilitators are.. taking through an action plan.. that's pretty cut and dry". She was therefore realizing that despite the reports she is requesting, she does not really know everything that is happening inside the teams. The facilitator of the google classroom PLC has a list of items she wants to go through over the course of the school

year, and the administration needs to know the proficiency level they will end up with, but she admits: “I don’t know what it’s gonna look like yet, just to be honest with you.” (Margot).

So, there appeared to be no real assessment plan for the ‘PLCs’. The participating team members complained about this and noted it as one of their future requests to the administration, to have a clearer idea of where their efforts are leading them. We will come back to this issue in the discussion section because this is an important aspect of the design principle that needs to be addressed (DuFour et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the issues regarding assessment of the process was not included in the planning:

> give [an initiative] time in time…like at least three years I think, to decide is this working? Is it not working? So. we tweak it and to let the teachers be in on the feedback and the tweaking. I really believe in that grassroots change. I think it makes a much better environment. (Kanada G.)

This is exactly what DuFour et al. (2016) advises to do even if they believe that assignments can come from the top, assessing the knowledge base and what is happening in the teams, and working on an improvement plan should be part of the cyclic work of a PLC. For now, let us try to revisit the impact of the design on teacher’s motivation, interpersonal relationship and professional.

Question# 3. How Does the Design of the PLC Impact Teachers’ Motivation, Interpersonal Relationships, and Personal Growth as Professionals?

All the successes and failures that are inherent in any human work have forceful impact on the lives of people who experience the process. Positive impact can lead to resiliency and strengthening of human and professional skills, but failure can lead to stress, depression, and can lead to turnover and teacher attrition. A balance should be found, and improvement plans

implemented to keep the process going. We will see how successes and failure affects teacher's motivation, relationships and professionalism.

Theme # 5: Team members' experience often works as a 'rescue dog'.

Experience makes people's work easy and even routine like when a desire of perpetual renewal of knowledge does not sustain ongoing professional development. For the team I studied experience was helpful in many different ways increased teachers' positive intrapersonal relationships and professional ones, especially when they were in doubt or struggling.

1. Motivation.

For the participating grade level team, I observed and interviewed, the motivation to be successful at the individual and team level for the improvement of student achievement and well-being inside the school and at home, transpired at all times. The team's culture of collaboration was effective because members were putting forth the team's solidarity and readiness to share. The members' experience as teachers, teacher leaders, and interim administrators helped them anticipate possible issues and avoid them by working together to find solutions. Communication and sharing of resources was the strongest aspect of their collaboration. They knew how to avoid the pitfalls of the design process and difficulties of collaboration as they remembered issues with previous team members in this building or from other schools. They are highly motivated and use their personal time to collaborate and take online training to keep up with mandates, but also to keep the reflection going for the improvement of team's collective practices.

2. Team members' relationships.

We already magnified how the team embraced the idea of respect and mutual support because they understand what it really means for them all. They all recognized with humility their strength and weaknesses both individually and as a team. They had the same vision and the

same goals for their students, so they treat each other's students as their own because of shared responsibility for the team's success is a reality for them. When other teams are experiencing growing pains because members are feeling territorial about their special activities due to self-esteem or stress, when others may not want to meet or share, this "solid team" as they called themselves, was on another dimension: "what I liked the best is we each have our own classroom, but we take on each other's students as if they are our own. And we try to develop relationships with kids" (Ryan B.). They understand that three heads are better than one, so, she added: "like if you spot a kid that needs more relationship than just their one teacher, then we kind of support each other in the hallways [..] we're always checking back in with each other. What works best for this kid? I noticed this kid was down, what helps him?" (Ryan B.)

Mutual trust enabled them to rely on each other and to know where to seek help, and their self-confidence also allowed them to offer spontaneous help because they know that team members will accept spontaneous help without second thoughts. Furthermore, they value each and everyone's experience.

> And since we're so willing to share…if you look at how many years of experience everybody has, and brings to the table.[..] So, because there are so many years of experience here…and even from different places.. Right!.. because we do collaborate and share so well so many different ideas can be brought to the table […] So, it's really nice to have the different heads together. (Julie M.)

This team really appreciated each other! They understood that nobody was judging them, they valued and respected each other, they had the same focus and mutually upheld each other. So, healthy conversation was happening and the adherence of all members to the team's values

was total and they all felt safe inside their team. They did not experience fear, jealousy, loneliness or competition inside the team. On the contrary, high motivation combined with self-awareness and team caring, humility and helpfulness allowed them to stay clairvoyant, and work as one to find solutions to the issues they encountered. This increases self-awareness and gives birth to effective strategies shared for the benefit of their team and their students. However not everything worked as perfectly as they would like, but they were resourceful and knew how to stand up for their team and students.

3. Power dynamics.

The team was aware that issues existed everywhere and that the first step to address them was to acknowledge their existence and to face them. Their first pro-reactivity was to find ways to create useful collaborative time out of the regular scheduled meeting times. They worked to tweak activities and meeting times to gain more time to discuss issues with their students and, most importantly, to find the time to implement the outcomes of their conversation. They were motivated and took time to stop and talk and record their agreements, but their workload sometimes does not allow them to follow-up on decisions they make.

> So, all those things we bring into light during our ABC meeting, when do we have that time for follow-up? That's the hardest part.. I'm getting that.. and we should… you have to squeeze it. Right? Because that really is such an important part of our job. So, I hate that I even had to say squeeze. We shouldn't have to squeeze. That's really important, those types of conversations about our kiddos. (Julie M.)

Time issues are everywhere, but the teams' strategy was to tweak it a bit and make it look like an hour on paper for the sake of the administrative report, and therefore bank time for more

effective conversations, as DuFour et al. (2016) advises. I found this interesting and effective. The team finally decided to request more flexibility from the administration regarding the change of periodicity of the meetings which went from biweekly to now being assigned weekly. They send-out initiatives to the administration for the rearrangement of their schedule and activities to make them feasible and more useful. They thus ensure effectiveness and a wiser way to use time than assigned by the administration. For example, instead of using substitutes, they suggested to pull-out their students who struggle and take them to a quiet place to address reading issues with them, and together they would follow-up the following weeks to monitor progress. For math, they also used the same strategy to help them evaluate their benchmarking tools by reflecting as a group on difficulties students faced and addressed them while keeping the self-questioning up. I found this was very responsible to not just stop at the level of the original assignment, but also going beyond the administration's edicts by trying to improve them and to make them fit their situation. Their collective work towards a timeline for both team and results improvement was valuable. This could not be done if they were not very experienced teachers and were motivated to collaborate and support each other and their kids, and also to seek adjustments from the administration's plan.

4. Experience.

Being experienced was indeed an important pillar of this team's success. It allowed them to anticipate issues between the members of the team since they all have a long history of collaborative issues and successes throughout their career; but they also could anticipate possible issues, especially when they came from implementation of the administration's directives or actions. They knew when the results were related to their classroom population (class size, ratio teacher-students, number of English learners, number of disabled students, number of helpers

inside classes, experience of the teacher, fair or unfair treatment of novice teacher etc.). They believed that each classroom or team has its own realities. So, it would be unfair to compare teams and students' results without taking into account all the parameters. Furthermore, novice teachers are already stressed about the newness of everything that what they need more is someone who can hold their hand and walk them through the process.

5. Consequences on Interpersonal Relationship and Professional Growth.

The team's relationships were strengthened because they understood that they needed to stick together and to stay faithful to each other. So, the unsafe feeling that seemed to exist in other teams did not exist here. On the contrary, they felt safe and supported by other members and, up to a certain point, the administration. There was no competition or need for recognition other than for teams' efforts. Any of the teachers would take initiatives in the name of the team and only for the sake of improvement and best practices, and knew the others would buy-in.

> So, when Kanada writes a grant she writes it for all of us, we all benefit. When Miss Julie who's an Internet freak. She loves to find… she's a Pinterest queen, she's a daily cafe queen, and any time she finds something she doesn't ask me if I want it. She prints it for us and says: 'use it if you can.'(Ryan B.)

To the team that is invaluable, it saves time and effort, it provides equity to all kids. Julie spontaneously added with passion. "I could never imagine taking my kiddos without you guys!" It was a pleasure to hear the others response in unison:

> Ryan B.: Yeah ! to us it's not an option.
>
> Julie M and Kanada G.. No, it's not an option.

They felt stronger and more confident in their abilities because of the trust, humility and honesty, and they are more and more faithful to the values of the team. They knew that they can

share anything, and it would be welcome. It was wonderful to see mutual appreciation in their eyes and to hear it in their voices. Julie M. said she was grateful to the others: “Could you imagine me coming to second grade and not having a team that was willing to help and share.. I mean.. everything I did, I got from you guys.. really I had no idea. Yeah no idea” (Julie M.). This confession of invaluable mentoring, with respect and understanding was not only a discourse, but also a strong deep belief. They all were aware of the important of staying united and safe, they knew what self-protection meant when it was combined with the protection of other members. They gave an example of how they dealt with an issue the previous school year with an administrator by agreeing to stick together and face the issue. They still talk about it with pride and celebration.

> Kanada G : Yeah. I feel like what we have done is.. we have truly been an example. Last year we had a conflict with an administrator, and we could have all gone in a different direction and we all.. we just.. we made a conscious effort to stick together, and to be an example.. like as much as we were angry and hurt about the conflict. We would help each other through it. You know we would vent to each other but then we would say ‘you know what? Let's stick to the work, I know we're feeling like this but when we meet we needed the professional thing to do’. And there were times when the administrator was trying to get us to meet
>
> Ryan B.: Separate though!
>
> Julie M. :Separately!
>
> Kanada G. : Yes, separately and we just kept saying ‘No, no, it has to be the three of us or none at all’.

> Julie M.: Whenever we get correspondence from the administrative, we would share.

The trustworthiness, fairness and commitment to the team was extraordinary and would never be achieved without great experience and genuine involvement to the same goals, values and vision. I was amazed at the professionalism and honesty with other members. They took action but without animosity towards the administration or any others. They received respect and consideration.

> Kanada G.: So, we did that, and we stuck really strong and we ended up resolving it. Not only was it resolved, but I think we modeled for that administrator that we weren't going to attack. We weren't going to gang up on her. We just really wanted to hear from her the same thing. We don't want to hear three different things, and we do not want her to try and get at one of us. You know we just felt like let's stick together because the conflict happened when we were all together, therefore, we'll deal with it all together.

I think that was fantastic. They seemed to find the right way to deal with the issue to show that the unity of the team was primordial for them and that transparency should always prevail if they want to keep mutual trust, mutual support and faithfulness to their values. I also think that this was awesome to show what the theory looks like when you take it into practice: it is more than mere words. As DuFour et al.(2016) put it, if you hope to lead implementation of the PLC process on a districtwide basis, you must be prepared to answer a number of questions among which: ”what current district practices and leadership behaviors are not aligned with the purposes and priorities we have articulated?” (p. 233). This is a lesson we all should learn as members of a learning community, just stand up and without animosity, use dialectics to *agree to disagree*, and

use discussion to better understand each other and move forward. As they asserted, this was a lesson for all.

> Kanada G.: And it ended up making a real change. I feel like that administrator took our example and has acted differently in a more professional way. And I feel really proud about how we dealt with a conflict and modelled for others.
>
> Julie M.: I mean we even have administrators that throw each other under the bus. [..] And I'm like.. they should never do that in front of their staff.

It seemed that their prior experience in administration and team building made it look easy for them to be successful in conflict management. The team was truly conscious that gossip could give birth to more frustration and corrupt the unity of the team, mutual trust, and team's efforts to get through and stay strong. I appreciated the fact that they were aware that it was not defiance or animosity towards the administration, but mainly an effort toward building a healthy relationship with both team members and administration.

In the same vein they made the point to decenter from other teams and to foster respect, by building a culture of fruitful collaboration with vertical and horizontal alignments. In doing so, they worked to eliminate jealousy, resentfulness and to better understand the apparent rudeness that sometimes arose from other grade level teams in the building when teachers felt territorial about their activities and classrooms, or when some did not want to meet or to share resources or professional issues. For example, remember the incident with the resource teacher calling them the 'dream team' and how they dealt with that.

> Ryan B**.:** And that's one of the resource teachers we had to tell him to quit calling us the Dream Team because when you do that, it makes others feel…
>
> Kanada G**.** : It makes others feel bad and I don't want to do that.

> Ryan B.: Kanada was like 'I'll talk to him. He's got to quit saying that' and he doesn't say that anymore. But in doing that it does make other grade levels feel bad and they want to find something bad that you're doing.

The team members were aware that challenges will always exist and that they are part of the game, but since they created their own successful collaboration plan, they all felt safe in their wing and started including teachers from other teams in their plans, especially novice teachers whom they embraced and befriended: "We have a lot…our team has a lot of conversations about that. And taking the time to let them know they're doing OK that all new teachers struggle." (Ryan B.). They all agree that they feel safe and lifted up in the wing and would like other teachers to experience the same feelings because according to Julie M. this wing was like their second home. So, despite some very challenging veteran teachers, they " make a really conscious effort to help each other because [..] we see that it makes our job better. (Ryan B.)

Ongoing reflection that bears in mind the school and team's visions and values, and a focus on improvement plans for collaborative efforts, drove the team's ongoing self-questioning and positive conversations. We can understand the unwillingness to confront reluctant teachers, as expressed by Margot. Issues of funding and workload did not allow her a lot of freedom. However, by working with the experienced teachers with honesty, trust and respect, they could work together to ensure helpfulness and non-judgmental initiatives such as spontaneous help to needy teachers and students and openness to discussion in a transparent atmosphere. The team had multiple anecdotes of young teachers who remained very grateful to them because they spontaneously offered their help in an embarrassing situation where frustration, misunderstanding, and professional skills were missing. They humbly identified themselves with the novice teachers when they were inexperienced and struggling without any help. Of

course, they admitted that they also valued the spontaneous acceptance of help from those teachers as well. We will come back to all this in our discussion section.

New perspectives on personal growth started to unite the team members. They ascertained their beliefs in building the strongest relationships possible, but they requested a better organization that could allow opportunities to do so during their school day so as to decrease frustration levels. “You know we want to see that happen. We don't want to keep adding to our plate after.” (Ryan B.) Margot was aware of the workload and how stress levels can be high. That is why she did not want to confront reluctant team members when funding issues were added to this list.

> Being here as long as I have, I'm frustrated with… we have bought a lot of our own curriculum. We've done a lot of our own training on our own time. And I feel like if these are initiatives we need to invest in them and invest in the teachers to do them. You Know, (Ryan B.)

The online trainings added to all the scheduled meetings were so numerous and they had to complete them online on their personal time and there was no incentive to do so. For Kanada G. “to implement something you have to give it time in time.”

Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter I used descriptive comparative methods to report the findings of a year-long study at a midwestern school district to better understand how they designed their new PLC and the lived experiences of team members during the planning, implementation and assessment of the PLC process. I also studied its impact on their interpersonal relationships and on their professional growth. Comparing SamaSchool’s PLC to the PLC of the framework from DuFour et al. (2016), I discovered that most activities of the PLC were geared towards teachers’ learning,

but focus on student achievement through inquiry and action research in order to collectively address issues children did not appear to be among the PLC activities. On the contrary, activities appeared to reflect more of a series of training opportunities for teachers to meet the state and county mandates as designated by the administration. However, the PLC has just completed a year and collaboration was real in the mentoring program and ABC meetings. But other than that, activities were more geared towards teacher learning. Like all places where people try to collaborate, power struggles exist, but the team I studied has enough experience to address issues for students, teammates and other colleagues in the building with professionalism and commitment. The strongest aspect of their team was communication and commitment; the weakest point was time issues. Their motivation to achieve better results for their students and to keep on supporting each other is simply wonderful. I am also convinced that the improvement of the PLC process may not be as challenging if efforts are put forth to establish collective norms and protocols that all member would abide.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In Chapter Four I, presented the findings of my study comparing them with DuFour et al. (2016) framework, situated learning, and the latest literature about PLCs. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings and how they relate to the literature about professional development, and PLCs, and how the themes uncovered fit into the literature and the framework. I will highlight the limitations of my study, provide recommendations for future directions and improvement of this process, and point to directions for future research.

The findings showed that SamaSchool is striving to build a new community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through a district wide PLC by sharing best practices and upholding every teacher for the benefit of improved student learning. DuFour et al. (2016) stated that nowadays, to meet challenges, districts merely jump on the bandwagon of PLCs and indulge in routine monthly workshops they call PLC. Even though I believe there was a real preparation before the start of the process the findings are not very different from the literature for many aspects of the organization and implementation of the local PLC. As with any human work, there are some difficulties that can be worked out and improved upon as shown in Chapter IV.

Misconception: what a PLC is not

Looking back, I remember that when describing the misconception of what a PLC is, DuFour et al. (2016) described exactly what is happening at SamaSchool. Margot talked about their 'program' while DuFour et al. (2016) kept warning throughout their work about instances in which educators assume a PLC is a program, or a meeting, an occasional event when colleagues meet to complete a task; or other cases when educators think they are members of a PLC because they discuss topics based on common readings (book clubs). So, for DuFour et al.

(2016), it is primordial to clarify that a PLC is not a program but rather a process of recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research that educators indulge in, using student data to achieve better student results. When DuFour et al. (2016) consider the School or district as the PLC, and the various collaborative teams as its building blocks, SamaSchool has different small 'PLCs' embedded in the bigger one where they complete tasks and learn in the form of workshops during the PLC scheduled meeting time. To me this is a misconception of what a PLC is if checked against DuFour et al.'s (2016) framework. Teacher learning is very important because it makes teaching more effective, but the focus in a PLC is on the improvement of student achievement. SamaSchool PLC should work first to change the school's misconception of PLCs. The monthly PLC meeting is mere workshops or Professional Development meetings that are really part of the process but should not be the first stage; Furthermore, they are not really collaborative but geared more towards learning together new skills and new information about their teaching career. DuFour et al. (2016) asserted that calling it a PLC does not make it a PLC, it has to be processed as one to yield successful collaboration and further student achievements. This could morph the obstacles into success, especially at the early stages of the process, because of a better understanding of what a PLC is for all members. Failing to do so will result in obstacles undermining their efforts no matter how hard they try to work, monitor, or be committed to its success. The PLC at SamaSchool has notable successes but also has obstacles that can be worked out along the process.

Successes and Obstacles

1. Teams.

Little (2012) contends that in education, the appeal of a PLC is rooted in habits of organizational routines and professional roles and has influenced a surge in practitioner-oriented

guides and professional development offerings. When we look at the design of the PLC at SamaSchool, there are a multitude of teams geared towards teacher learning ('local PLC', coaching days, mentoring teams) and a multitude of meetings (training, share-outs, monthly/weekly or quarterly meetings etc.). But when we check against the DuFour et al.'s (2016) framework only ABC meetings meet the collaborative involvement and commitment that the process requires to be a PLC. ABC meetings are really very well structured in terms of inquiry, data use and the structure of its members (level grade team working in collaboration with all school personnel intervening in the student's school life). However, for DuFour et al. (2008; 2016), the first obstacle to a well implemented PLC process is the lack of clarity in the definition of a PLC. Again, for DuFour et al. (2016), the term has become commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe any gathering of individuals who share common interests in education; so, it is in danger of losing its meaning. At SamaSchool, they call 'local PLCs' monthly workshops organized for teacher learning that might have been used to enhance ABC teams' collaboration since the weekly meetings were only 30 minutes long in theory, but in reality, getting the students out of class and welcoming them back from recess, eliminated almost 10 minutes from each meeting. Furthermore, that time was also considered the planning time. So, to me, the time for the monthly PLC might be better used otherwise as extra ABC meeting time since the focus of the PLC meetings should be on results not on the activities.

3. Collaborative Culture.

Another important obstacle I discovered that was tightly tied to the first was the process of building that collaborative culture and collective responsibility. Hollins et al. (2004), Zhang et al. (2017), and DuFour et al. (2016) warned that collaboration is not optional, on the contrary, it is required and expected for all staff. Furthermore, as DuFour et al. (2016) posit, "the first steps

educators take when making decisions is to learn together" (p.113). But the foundations of the PLC should be well-laid with the four pillars of mission, vision, values, and goals well defined and understood by all. This is stated throughout the literature about Situated Learning and Social Constructivism (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; and Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). I discovered that the participating team really focused on the interdependent collaborative efforts of the high achieving PLC as described by DuFour et al.'s (2016) in the four critical questions of the PLC in progress. These questions drive the work of a PLC regarding the knowledge, skills and dispositions every student should acquire as a result of the unit, course or this grade level. The questions include how they will know each student has acquired the essential knowledge, how to respond when some students do not learn the essential knowledge, skill and dispositions, and how to extend the learning for the already proficient students. I am convinced by my observations that team members focused on these during ABC meetings, and the team's structure coupled with the online accessibility of the form they were required to complete, should yield ongoing collaboration with the rest of the school personnel. However, I confess it did not happen often times when I checked the form online. I generally saw the three team members' input in the online version, which shows that the extended collaborative work needs improvement as well. I believe that SamaSchool PLC members should understand that if what is happening in the ABC meetings is well-monitored and improved with more time, it can result in real PLC activities. DuFour et al. (2016) cite Mintzberg (1994) who believes that we should not call new initiatives by their names, but we should define them with terms we understand and make our own. Only what we do is important not what we call it. Acronyms such as ABC or PLC are not important, what is important is the recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research for improved student achievement that

is happening during the ABC meetings and that are absent in SamaSchool's 'PLC' meetings even though teacher learning, when effective, leads to student learning.

I continuously reflect on the effectiveness of meetings when they are imposed in terms of collaboration. Furthermore, the top-down initiatives without a real clarification of the PLC mission, vision, values and goals, as the findings showed, built up frustration and lack of understanding, and a feeling of unsafety that could be avoided if the critical steps of building of a culture of collaboration were addressed properly by building shared common knowledge with all members from the start so that they can commit to the collective work without feeling that it is a mere duty to fulfil.

Administrators should build stronger trust with team representatives in the CIT meetings and be flexible enough to better consider initiatives the bottom-up with a more accepting mindset, because collaboration should be a two-way process with respectful consideration from both sides so that everyone works toward building consensus before the real work starts. The PLC work does not really need prescriptive rules and regulations. On the contrary, it should show commitment of members who indulge in work and collaboration with trusted autonomy and creativity. Another important aspect is to create a means to monitor the critical conditions of teamwork, and to put into place the conditions for a timely intervention to get the collective work going. Monitoring the critical conditions should be taken care of by team members themselves in full autonomy and shared responsibility. Having the multitude of teams with different foci does not make the work easy, and should be addressed by merging them in the collective process of focus on both teacher and student learning, and result orientation (of teams' work and student improved achievement) that can only be achieved with all PLC members' collective commitment

to personal, team's, and school success. That's how they can take and own shared responsibility in full understanding of their work.

4. Data Use.

While the essence of teacher learning is improved student achievement by improving teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Tanner et al., 2017; and Saunders et al., 2009), it is important to break down barriers to increase teacher collaboration, nurture shared values, commitments, reflective discussion, and common data analysis, and finally, to plan instruction focused on student learning instead of teaching strategies. At SamaSchool, 'PLCs' collaborative challenges existed because despite the good intention of the administration, the design focus was more on teacher learning during their PLC meetings, instead of student learning as a follow-up of what is being done during ABC meetings with data use. So, the findings revealed that having different disciplines on the same team because it is a grade level team in Junior or Senior High, displaced the focus because, for the most part, members would focus more on student behavior than on academics, since that is all what the teams had in common that they believed they could change. As already shown, it is of a paramount importance for PLC members to use the results of formative assessments to identify students who are lagging behind and to provide the needed support in an atmosphere of pure collegiality inside a culture of collaboration. To me the most successful aspect of the collaboration culture of SamaSchool's PLC in the team I studied was the use of student data to inform their professional practice and to respond with the right intervention or enrichment for students who needed extra help. The team was successful in this aspect of the third Big Idea of *result orientation* that is the main focus of educators in a PLC. The findings of the study showed that the team followed DuFour et al.'s (2016) framework and recognized that

their efforts could be assessed on the basis of their students' increased results. However, as we will see next, the focus on the result orientation had its pitfalls that research already studied.

SamaSchool's unit assessment plan also followed positive reports of a successful PLC as described by Macgregor and Vavasseur (2015): the instructional unit plans are assessed according to criteria: connected to the curriculum, alignment of all the activities to standards, and the inclusion of the assessment tools. The team members I studied worked together on benchmarking and intervention phases for the sake of improvement. This was a really successful aspect of their collaboration. Despite normal anxiety coming from accountability and the risk to be judged based on results, they worked together to identify nonsensical curriculum, deconstruct the standards, prioritize them according to what students should know, and designed benchmarks. They also worked on developing common formative assessments to promote equity for students in their team and to monitor their progress.

Fortunately, this experienced team asserted that they were relatively free to adjust pacing to meet student's needs of essential learning, but they did not usually have enough time for the follow-up needed in the intervention phase to improve struggling students' results even though multi-tiered support services existed. Members would prefer to do the follow-up themselves if they had time to do so. However, they were pretty proud of their PBIS (the Positive Behavior Intervention Support) that is bottom-up, and that they worked to be smooth and well understood by students who perfectly developed the needed skills over time. They also claimed a more consistent choice of textbook series and a time to make the most of them before they are changed again, even though six days of curriculum set-up were scheduled (three days during the school year and there days during summer break) by the administration to work on possible issues and to find better ways to maximize the offerings. I could not collect data from other

teams though to see how this aspect was dealt with in their team and how they used their scheduled time. This brings us to the most crucial obstacle of this PLC: time.

5. Time.

As the findings in Chapter IV revealed, the team members I studied asserted time was the biggest obstacle to their collaboration and yielded frustrations and hindrances for them to fulfill their goals. The district and school administration had created scheduled time for collaboration as advised by literature, but it could be better maximized if there was as much flexibility as was intended. Working extra time on weekends and breaks, finishing schooldays hours after school had ended, committing to sleepless nights to meet the teams' deadlines and still risking a scolding when you request more time, is decidedly unfair and may result in failure to commit to the work because of frustration and disappointment. According to DuFour et al. (2016), this needs to be fixed by working towards banking precious time, and choosing the parts of the curriculum that really deserve to devote time to, and to discard the rest. The team was acknowledgeable regarding effective strategies to bank precious time for teamwork, but if as experienced veteran teachers they see time as their weakest collaborative work, I wonder what it might look like for a team where there are novice teachers who also have to an intensive mentoring program and other scheduled mandatory trainings. Teams should be trusted a bit more, empowered and accompanied through the process of banking extra time, and allowed to use their time as wisely as they believe is best. However, the realities of the state's accountability measures do not give the administration a lot of choice either and that's a big issue to consider.

***6.* State Accountability Measures.**

PLCs are at the forefront of school reform efforts to help educational staff address the challenges of increasing student achievement following US federal and state accountability

policies. School reforms and accountability measures following the 1983 report A Nation at Risk related to the perceived failure of US public schools, gave birth to the effective school movement focusing on school improvement through change models (DuFour, 2004; Cormier & Olivier, 2009; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; and Schmoker, 2006). During the study of the PLC process at SamaSchool I kept reflecting on the failure of school reforms according to DuFour and Eaker (1998). For them and other researchers, the failure was due to five major reasons: a complex reform task, misguided focus of the reform efforts, an emphasis on improvement that did not have a vision of a measurable outcome, a general lack of perseverance and commitment, and the inability to address the change process (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). Understanding that school reform must include deep commitment from local stakeholders is extremely important but DuFour et al. (2008; 2016) believe that school leaders are too often looking unsuccessfully for short cuts with disappointing results and others point to policy measures that go with a general endorsement of higher accountability (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). The same issues seem to exist in the SamaSchool PLC. So, this was widely studied in literature, and might be a source of good ideas for their administration as they work towards finding solutions with the leading coalition they create to guide the work of the PLC; the issue is not new at all. However, if the stakeholders understand that PLC members learn in situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Caldwell, 2012), they should bear in mind the paramount importance of collaboration in the work of a PLC, and also the place affect and time play in that collaboration.

DuFour et al. (2016) and many other educational researchers think that merely organizing people into teams does not guarantee school improvement and increased student learning. They need to ensure real learning is happening by organizing timely assessment of teamwork (at least twice a year according to DuFour et al., 2016). At SamaSchool, it is normal and advised that the

Superintendent and Curriculum Director fill the need to monitor by requiring reports for school policies as a way to enforce the tight and loose elements of the PLC, but it is also up to them to weigh how tight or loose they should be for effective professional development and collaboration to occur. That's the only way collective commitment and effective teams can be enhanced by the well-organized activities they complete, and the result will be improved student achievement, not well written reports with interesting intents that may never happen because meetings are considered by team members as assigned administrative duties to fulfill.

7. Collective Commitments.

As stated by Tanner et al. (2017), the challenge for educational leaders when implementing a new initiative is to establish a culture engaging all stakeholders because instructional coaching requires strong leadership to facilitate the process and to engage stakeholders so that the intended instructional benefits of the coaching process can take place. This seemed to be exactly the case at the SamaSchool PLC with the capacity building directed by the Curriculum Director who leads the PLC process. It will take time before the success of the capacity building can be assessed, but adjustments can occur any time during the PLC process, so hopefully adjustments will happen. Furthermore, a lot of reflection should be put into the process and activities to know if prescriptive assignment to teams means strength for the PLC leader. Should the leaders supervising the work of the PLC members also be those who do teacher evaluation? DuFour et al.(2016) think that they should not, if they are to remain the instructional leaders because then the rapport may be biased from the beginning.

Implementing newness is always challenging. What is the use of pushing new initiatives on new teachers when the veteran teachers, especially tenured ones do not follow suit? Will fruitful collaboration occur in such an environment? These are some questions that need to be

addressed. I believe this divides more than it unites team members around the essentials. It would be better to work more in getting the maximum staff aboard through effective communication and listening, so that most people buy in. It is not surprising that at SamaSchool, the same issues shared by all professional development entities exist (money, resources, space and time for collaboration). This exacerbates the limitations posed for the leadership team when they want team members to do extra work without incentives. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the most debated issue that should and can be addressed, according to research, is building in time to collaborate. The SamaSchool PLC's leadership knows that a reciprocal accountability demands that they create the structure for enough meeting time during their contractual hours and this does exist. The multiplicity of activities does not mean that collaboration is really happening as DuFour et al. (2016) and the other researchers stress. The name is not really the most important thing, but rather what is happening in terms of school change as a result of collaboration.

ABC meetings and their follow-up are really effective and should be enhanced with more time and resources. As a result, leaders should listen to teams' complaints about time. It is unfair to stress the importance of the collaborative effort if enough useful time and/or resources are not provided (Supovitz, 2013; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Sims & Penny, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Vescio, et al., 2008; Barnes et al., 2010). School leaders should know how to prioritize meetings and resource allocations in order to create enough time for collaboration no matter how difficult realities may be. Community pressure, such as issues of childcare can sometimes stop a district's initiative when there are ideas such as getting out of class a little earlier, but other ways of banking time exist in the literature (DuFour et al., 2016).

For Barnes et al. (2010), developing PLCs needs time, connections, incentives for at least

principals, and capacity building resources such as knowledgeable facilitators and knowledge of effective instructional leadership. At SamaSchool, the leadership is knowledgeable about that but suffer from the weight of responsibility and the obligation to account for what is happening. By the end of my conversation with Margot, she finally acknowledged that the organization needs improvement to be smoother and the assessment of the process should occur periodically. DuFour et al. (2016) stated that some districts that pay their teachers extra hours to extend their school day in order to gain time for collaboration, but for SamaSchool incentives are a cost prohibitive burden for the district. This grade level team used personal time to collaborate, but I doubt all teams do the same. This increases what is constant in the literature: the fear of being judged by the administration and peers, being scolded, or losing a job (Sims & Penny, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013). These issues are common to all professional development programs indeed (Willis & Templeton, 2017; Macgregor & Vavasseur, 2015; Woodland & Mazur, 2015). The participating team at SamaSchool established a vulnerability-based trust among its members by acknowledging mistakes, weaknesses, failures and the need for help from other team members. They appreciated other members values, strength, and skills, and were ready to learn from each other. However, an administrative vulnerability is coupled with dysfunction with the avoidance of productive conflict for preference of an artificial harmony, which lacks insightful self-questioning and advocacy (Willis & Templeton, 2017; DuFour et al., 2016; Vescio et al., 2008). We can see that when listening to Margot, and again the avoidance of accountability forced novice teachers to accept the initiatives coming from the administration in mere heteronomous obedience in order to stay safe. Team members are unwilling to confront their peers who fail to honor teamwork toward PLC goals, as does the administration. Margot talked about workload and incentive issues that

prevented her from confronting ‘reluctant bullies’ as she calls them even though she understood that PLC members should engage with educational policies and make committed and sincere efforts towards collective improvement (Hargreaves, 2010). Teachers and administrators need to work hand in hand for a sustainable new policy implementation. Woodland and Mazur’s (2015) *hammer* (policy makers’ rigorous educator evaluation) increases the feeling of unsafety and frustration. This explain the difficulties I encountered when I tried my best to recruit novice, veteran and tenured teachers and could not get access to them. Despite the difficulty of Margot to admit that issues exist at SamaSchool, it could not hide a reality of a lack of shared knowledge that was confirmed by novice teachers (not participating) that I personally approached, and who confessed to me that they had to decline my request to participate in the study because they did not know if they could be of any help to me, because they were new to the building and did not understand the ‘program’ yet.

The participating team members were humble and considered the challenges from the other teams’ perspectives by decentering. The much appreciated perspective taking helps members have intrapersonal understanding by showing that they accurately know the struggles other team members go through and their feelings, concerns and interests whether they are spoken or silent. This is a real success in my study because caring requires members to infuse positive attitudes, appreciation and respect to other staff members for the validation of teamwork, self-evaluation of its effectiveness in order to stay positive, cultivate positive affect and behavior so as to grow in a positive environment with positive images of the past, and by using proactive problem-solving skills. They understand that they belong to and have the PLC organizational awareness. For DuFour et al. (2016), open honesty will allow team members to value what prevents the negative and to promote the positive aspects of team members That’s how they grow as professionals by

building from their experience to navigate safely the meanders of the PLC process, dragging with them struggling teachers and confronting an administration. They ignore gossip and try to focus on the essential for personal and student growth. Other teams need the help of the leading coalition to avoid the issues that were happening in the anecdotes the team members discussed in the focus group interview.

8. Growth.

The team I studied, despite the issues, were witnessing both student and teacher growth along the PLC process. Members are building from experience to create a survival kit for their interpersonal relationships and a kind of shield to self-protect and protect other team members against injustice, competition, the feeling of unsafety and failure to meet the standards of a PLC. I really value their endeavors to stay a solid team, and stay professional for better student results. After deleting physical or imaginary lines between their personal and professional lives by forgetting their frustration and anger at how things unfold at school because of new initiatives that are not being well-implemented; they also devote their money in resources, and in students' health issues. They narrated this with so much pride and passion that one might believe the frustration is merely imaginary. Furthermore, their fight is not only for the team, but they also decenter and embrace other teams and struggling teachers, and offer a helping shoulder for them. The findings showed that when the administration could not create time for collaboration, their desire of personal growth taught them how to bank time during the regular hours. This was awesome. So, no wonder student growth also happened because of the commitment of the ingenious team. They relied on administration, but they had also their own resources to grow as a team, grow as professionals and help their peers and students grow as well. However, I need to stress that the teachers who really needed help in the process (novice teachers and struggling

teams with contrasted personalities) were not represented in my study. I was unable to get access to reluctant and struggling non-tenured teachers either. This counts towards the various limitations of my study.

Limitations

1. **Recruitment of Participants**

The most challenging part of my study was the recruitment of participants. After gaining access to the leaders of the school district with the help of my university faculty, I had to struggle for months before getting access to team members and to be able to enroll them in my study. I therefore could not have more than one participant from the administration, and a focus group composing the elementary grade level team of three female teachers. I did not have a male participant no matter how hard I tried. I believe that a male perspective would give me ideas about the impact of gender differences or similarities in the dynamic administration / team members. The number of participants was shortened either because the leadership did not give access to other teams, or teams themselves declined my request. It would have been awesome to have different types teams (interdisciplinary teams were of great interest for me because of the issue of parallel scheduling and academic data use) and different types of participants such as novice teachers, veteran teachers, tenured teachers, psychologists or other support service personnel. Unfortunately, there was an apparent non-acceptance of an outside observer, and access was denied either because of the constraints of accountability measures, or teams overwhelmed with workload and did not want to add more to it, or feared to show weaknesses or failure in their collaborative work. I therefore studied a team of experienced teachers among which two out of the three experienced the position of interim administrators; which meant knowledge of both sides and all the pitfalls to avoid.

2. Data Collection

My data collection took place over a whole school year with a few months of interruption after the interview with the curriculum director when it became difficult to confirm my invitation to attend PLC meetings and access possible participants. It was a waste of time and great frustration and uncertainty for me, but the following semester I was able to recruit the focus group participants and start observations of the team's weekly meetings. I also was able to get access to the ABC online form sent out to administration and the interdisciplinary team that has to work with the grade level team on students 'academic and behavioral data. Unfortunately, I had to stop my data collection because of time issues related to my own dissertation timeline. I believe it would be great to keep the study going for at least two more years to be able to see how the process unfolds over the years and the outcome on both student achievement and teacher learning. It would also show the real impact on teacher interpersonal relationships and their professional growth, resiliency, teacher retention, and new teacher recruitment over time. I also would have appreciated being able to collect data from the online training sessions that were mandatory but should be taken on teachers own free time. This aspect deserves a full study.

The end of school share-out session about the 10 'PLCs' topics could yield very interesting data, but I did not have access to collect data from the feedback of the whole district personnel gathered in one space. The findings could have been different if I had other school personnel in my study, and I had no data from other teams other than anecdotes told to me by my participating team. Furthermore, I believe that a mixed-method study would have greater validity and transferability with more participants and a wider range of data collection and analysis strategies that would be possible if more participants were enrolled and a number of different experience types and gender were represented..

3. Student Results

My participating team asserted that their students results increased, but I did not have access to those scores because the students were not part of the study's population, and I did not have information about the results of other teams' students either because of my difficulty accessing members. However, the result orientation was the most studied part of the PLC process as literature shows, and it is always pictured as very effective in almost all PLCs when the process is well implemented. I assume it was the case here despite some implementation issues because there were really positive aspects in SamaSchool PLC process.

Recommendations and Direction for Further Research

The key element of successfully building collaboration is to create a network with a relaxed and welcoming tone that should move beyond mere prescription and become effective in PLC processes (Cormier & Olivier, 2009). That's why the tight and loose elements of SamaSchool need to be adjusted in order to make this happen in an effective manner. PLC leadership needs to work more on clarifying the purpose of the PLC so that all move beyond the philosophical mission of the school, to establish ownership of all the actions members need to keep moving forward in full understanding of the mission and responsibility for carrying it forward. The PLC leaders created a guiding coalition to help them, but as the team's representative stated, that coalition does not feel safe with the administration either. Shared knowledge of best practices by learning together in workshops and training sessions is effective , but this is a means to the end and should not take all the time that should be devoted to improvement of student learning through inquiry and action research which is the focus of a PLC. The lack of "safety out there" the team is talking about during the CIT meeting should be dealt with because the representatives of teams will never be able to infuse positive aspects of the process to the team if they encounter

such issues when meeting with the leaders. This has a negative impact on the general collegiality and hinders mutual trust, divides members and teams, enables gossip to prosper and should be banned from the process. Nothing needed to be pushed on anybody if mutual ownership of the process is achieved, especially on struggling new teachers who need more support. The administration should not assume that agreement with the goals and procedures exist just because as Margot said, she "never heard anybody say 'no' to [her]". Leaders will then arrive at a consensus and avoid embarking the members in routine gatherings meant to satisfy the hierarchy. On the contrary, they will all live their mission with ownership and hope of improved student results by taking the seven steps that DuFour et al. (2016) believe convey teams' commitment to school improvement on pp. 35-37. Furthermore, to avoid the occasional 'explosive conversations' that Margot regretted, they should empower the teams to make certain important decisions while demanding that they adhere to the core elements. The process should not just be theoretical, but should really translate into real trust, shared responsibility and realistic involvement with attainable short and long-term goals, not a laundry list of goals which exacerbates the issue of time management especially when staffing needs are real.

The issue of time will always exist in Education, but it should be given more consideration and worked out with teams at SamaSchool because it is real, hinders collaboration, and is frustrating even for the most dedicated teachers. DuFour et al. (2016) and other researchers discuss how to improve time constraints, and at Sama School, transferring part of the time of the 'PLC' days, and allocating it to the grade level teams to supplement the 30 minutes weekly ABC meetings, would give them enough time to delve more deeply inside students data without having to work overtime most days and during breaks. Furthermore, ABC meeting time is also considered their planning time so when you have a challenging student population in your

classroom one given semester, as can happen with English learners or students with behavioral or family issues, responsibility is even higher and having to 'squeeze' action research activities as they complain is really frustrating and should be worked out. They really need more staff in some classes with English Learners and students with behavioral issues, especially when they do not have student teachers, and turnover does not simplify things.

The collaborative work could be even better if they try DuFour et al. (2016)'s worksheet designed to help teams address the critical issues for team consideration. A very important (if not the most important) element of reciprocal accountability school districts leaders must address, is to establish clear parameters and to set priorities to guide PLC teamwork toward improved student achievement. However, offering the 10 topics of the 'PLC' meetings and assigning a fixed attendance to only one topic a year, even if topics come from 'needs assessment', limits members' possibilities.

What will happen when some teachers master the skills proposed in the workshops they chose earlier than anticipated since they have to stay there for the whole school year? I believe more flexibility in workshop attendance would be more beneficial if trust and commitment were achieved. Scheduling the weekly meetings on paper and knowing that they last less than 30 minutes because of the loss of time to get the kids in-and-out of the classroom satisfies the administrative reporting obligation . However, I can testify that the team I observed did not waste a second during the meeting, but they almost always had to stop the discussion before its conclusion because it was time to resume their classwork. Teams should be allowed to create their own norms stated as commitments rather than as beliefs, assessed and reviewed meetings after meetings for at least six months. SamaSchool should reduce the long lists of things to commit to for at least the first two years until the process becomes smoother and also clarify how

to respond when members do not follow teams' norms after each evaluation of their teamwork. In one word they should collaboratively develop and pursue SMART goals (O'Neil et al., 2006). DuFour et al. (2016) call leaders to refrain from opposing to provide teams time for collaboration so that they can work interdependently: phrases such as "you have to use your time more wisely" should be banned from the discourse in the workplace in order to maintain respect, mutual support, and mutual trust. Time created for collaboration is not unproductive time, as research and organizational literature ensure, when used to focus on discussion about the right work. Fullan (2001; 2007) believed that collaborative cultures may end up being powerfully wrong if they do not focus on the right things (here inquiry and action research to improve student results, not multiple 'PLCs' workshops). Woodland and Mazur (2015) consider that PLCs should be more of a "hug" and not the "hammer" evaluation system accountability measures impose.

Implications for Policy Makers

The administration at SamaSchool acknowledges that some teams make real efforts and can serve as models for other teams, but this should be celebrated in a way that infuses respect and consideration for all, and that does not give birth to jealousy, negative competition and a reason to seek personal recognition. To keep PLC teams motivated and aware of their personal and collective achievement, DuFour et al. (2016) advocate for leaders to grasp every opportunity to acknowledge teams' efforts and accomplishments how little they might be. So even less-performing teams should be included in the celebration when they achieve anything higher and show efforts. Discussions and openness to other perspectives and decentering will help leaders and members navigate the process smoothly and avoid frustration. I value the six days administration dedicate to curriculum set-up but unfortunately, three days among the six take place during summer break with all what it means in terms of sacrifice and frustration for

attendees. According to DuFour et al. (2016), when the tight elements in a PLC are coupled with a clear communication of what is tight in a consistent and unequivocal way, the PLC culture will be simultaneously loose and tight because ownership is earned by all. They should not "assume that common verbiage means common understanding" (p. 251). Policy-makers should bear in mind all the difficulties of the implementation of the PLC process and be more supportive of the leadership team. Leading different personalities is a very challenging task especially when involved in starting a deep change process. Teams therefore must feel supported by a reduced course load, increased number of teacher aides, and a supportive and ongoing communication from principals. This will ease retention efforts and diminish teacher attrition in this era when USA faces a severe teacher shortage (Rich, 2015). When Superintendents are backed up with the needed human and financial resources, they will work with principals to demonstrate reciprocal accountability, by providing ongoing coaching and support, hope is intact. As an outsider, I can understand the high expectation of DuFour's et al. (2016) assertion that sadly effective PLCs are not yet a norm in US schools districts, but I strongly believe that SamaSchool is on a the right track for a process that could be maximized if all conditions of teacher and student learning are met, and responsibility for success is given by policy makers and leaders, and accepted by all.

Policy makers should therefore make an effort to work with school districts in the first years of their PLC process by sending them experts of the PLC process for consultancy and advisement that has nothing to do with reporting or accountability but that will rather be more geared towards improvement of the process. School district leadership also should be trusted and accompanied in the process with enough human and financial resources necessary to make the change happen. Importantly they should work towards making the leading coalition feel safe in the reporting duties because if they do not feel safe how will they help teams feel safe and build

consensus? Leaders will not feel safe to delegate leadership power to a leadership team selected based on the influence they have on the rest of the members. A system should be put in place for a strong collaborative exchange between new and performing PLCs, for a better understanding and the assessment of the PLC's staff development so that they can build from there to make informed decisions, or to take corrective actions and involve maximum great teachers that used to stay in their 'bubbles,' as Margot stated. Non-acceptance of outside observers should be worked out so that they accept listening to a voice that can be non-judgmental but credible enough to bring a new insight. Furthermore, I believe that the resources DuFour et al. (2016) have posted at their website *go.SolutionTree.com/PLCbooks* as free reproductible should be utilized to improve their work.

SamaSchool is already doing great in the first year of their PLC but I think interesting research can be carried out in the future as the PLC process enfolds. It would be great to study how both District Leaders and Team Leaders will work towards improving the culture of collaboration in their PLC in the coming years. Another interesting aspect would be to see if they will keep the 'PLC' days organized around teacher proposed workshops where members have to stay in for a whole year or if they will end-up using at least most PLC days for student data evaluation and improvement, or still, if they will be a little more flexible in the workshop attendance assignment by allowing them to joint any of the workshops they are most interested in after assessment of teacher learning, instead of just imposing them to stay in one workshop for the whole year. Again, replicating this topic with a wider and more diverse population of teachers and staff in terms of gender, ethnicity, and experience would be more informative especially when it is studied with a mixed-method methodology for a greater validity and transferability.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITING SUBJECTS

Ndeye Helene Diack
Ph.D. Candidate.
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education and Human Services
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Re: Recruiting Subjects

Hello,

My name is Helene Diack and I am a Ph.D. student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (USA). I'm working on a project about the Building of a Collaborative Culture in a Professional Learning Community. I got your address from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at SIUC and I would like to ask if you would like to be part of my project and volunteer to answer a few questions about your experience in the PLC and how it impacts your life as a professional. I would appreciate to have an appointment with you at your most suitable time and place to discuss more in depth about my project.

I can be reached via telephone at 618-203-6716.

My email address is nhdiack@siu.edu.

If you are not able to respond to this inquiry, I would greatly appreciate it if you could refer me to another person who may be able to answer these questions.

Thanks in advance for your time and consideration. I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

APPENDIX B

COVER SHEET

Interviewee Pseudonym _____

Date of Interview _____

Time and place of Interview _____

E-mail _____ Telephone _____

Notes from previous contact:

Notes on Identifiable Issues (fill in following the interview)

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APPENDIX C

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING

(Signatures of participants required)

I (participant…….), agree to participate in this research project conducted by Ndeye Helene Diack, Ph.D. candidate in Education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale about 'The Culture of Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community: A case Study".

I understand the purpose of this study is to document Professional Learning Community (PLC) practices and the lived experiences of people involved in building a culture of collaboration in a PLC.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and I may refuse to answer any question or leave the study without penalty anytime. I am also informed that my participation will last from 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the time it takes to complete the interviews and that the researcher may come back to me for clarification.

I understand that my responses to the questions will be audio recorded, and that these tapes will be transcribed/stored and kept in a locked file cabinet. These tapes will be destroyed upon request.

I understand that all reports made from this research and written by the researcher will maintain confidentiality of individuals in the group. I understand that only data collected from the interviews will be reported and my name and the names of people in the interview group will not be used.

I understand that I can refuse to answer any question or leave the project at any time, and the researcher may contact me later for clarification questions.

Risks*: I understand* that because some interviews will be made with more than one person the researcher cannot guarantee that people in the group will not share what is being said or done. Risks might arise from participating in the study because studying culture may uncover hidden aspects of a community. Consequences may be the same as those of educator evaluation and/or teacher accountability for student achievement.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to:
Ndeye Helene Diack. Address: 800 S. Elizabeth st Apt C3. Carbondale, IL 62901
Email: nhdiack@siu.edu
Phone: +1(618) 203 6716
And
Dr. John McIntyre Email johnm@siu.edu, Phone: 618.536.2441
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape-recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

"I agree _____ I disagree _____to have my responses recorded on audio tape."
"I agree_____ I disagree _____ that Ndeye Helene Diack may quote me in her paper"

Participant signature and date _____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, **Office of Sponsored Research and Administration,** Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail siuhsc@siu.edu

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FOR DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

(Signatures of PLC Leader required)

I (participant…….), agree to allow the utilization of our PLC documents for this research project conducted by Ndeye Helene Diack, Ph.D. candidate in Education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, entitled "Addressing the Critical Steps of the Building of a Culture of Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community: A Case Study".

I understand the purpose of this study is to document Professional Learning Community (PLC) practices and the lived experiences of people involved in building of a culture of collaboration in a PLC.

I understand that allowing the utilization of these documents is voluntary and I may refuse to give any document or leave the study without penalty anytime. I am also informed that the utilization of the documents will last the duration of the study and that the researcher may come back to me for clarification.

I understand that the documents will be examined and stored in a locked file cabinet. They will be destroyed upon request.

I understand that all reports made from this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the PLC. I understand that only data collected from the documents will be reported and the name 0f the PLC and the names of people in the team will not be used. I also understand that I can refuse to give permission to use the documents and answer any question or leave the project at any time.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to:
Ndeye Helene Diack Phone: +1(618) 203 6716
800 S. Elizabeth st Apt A3
Carbondale, IL 62901
and
Dr. John McIntyre
email johnm@siu.edu,
Phone: 618.536.2441
Department of Curriculum and Instruction 625 Wham Building
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know that the documents will be utilized to document our PLC practices. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

"I agree _____ I disagree _____to have my responses recorded on audio- video tape."
"I agree_____ I disagree _____ that Ndeye Helene Diack may quote me in her paper"

PLC Leader signature and date_____

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Research and Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail siuhsc@siu.edu

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FOR TEAM OBSERVATION

(Signatures of participants required)

I (participant…….), agree to participate in this research project conducted by Ndeye Helene Diack, Ph.D. candidate in Education at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, untitled "Addressing the Critical Steps of the Building of a Culture of Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community: A Case Study".

I understand the purpose of this study is to document Professional Learning Community (PLC) practices and the lived experiences of people involved in building of a culture of collaboration in a PLC.

I understand my participation is strictly voluntary and I may refuse to be observed or leave the study without penalty anytime. I am also informed that my participation will last from the whole meeting time PLC, and that the researcher may come back to me for clarification.

I understand that my responses to the questions discussed during the meeting will be audio recorded, and that these tapes will be transcribed/stored and kept in a locked file cabinet. These tapes will be destroyed upon request.

I understand that all reports made from this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. I understand that only data collected from the meeting will be reported and my name and the names of people in the interview group will not be used. I understand that because the meeting will be with more than one person the researcher cannot guarantee that people in the group will not share what is being said or done. I also understand that I can refuse to participate in this observed meeting or leave the project at any time.

Risks: I understand that because some interviews will be made with more than one person the researcher cannot guarantee that people in the group will not share what is being said or done. Risks might arise from participating in the study because studying culture may uncover hidden aspects of a community. Consequences may be the same as those of educator evaluation and/or teacher accountability for student achievement.

I understand questions or concerns about this study are to be directed to:

Ndeye Helene Diack
email: nhdiack@siu.edu Phone: +1(618) 203 6716
800 S. Elisabeth st Apt A3
Carbondale, IL 62901
And
Dr. John McIntyre
email johnm@siu.edu, Phone: 618.536.2441
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

I have read the information above and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and know my responses will be tape-recorded. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me for the relevant information and phone numbers.

"I agree _____ I disagree _____to have my responses recorded on audio- video tape."
"I agree_____ I disagree _____ that Ndeye Helene Diack may quote me in her paper"

Participant signature and date

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, **Office of Sponsored Research and Administration,** Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533.
E-mail siuhsc@siu.edu

APPENDIX F1

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR TEAM CONSIDERATION

Adapted from Learning by Doing (Dufour et al., 2016, pp. 69-70)

1. How did you identify norms and protocols to guide you in working together?
2. How did you analyze student achievements?
3. How did you establish SMART goals to improve on this level of achievement you are working interdependently to attain?
4. What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students will acquire as a result of your course or grade level and each unit within your course or grade level?
5. Which standards and high stake assessments do you align essential student learning with?
6. Can you eliminate course content and topics and devote more time to the essential curriculum? How do you do that?
7. How do you work as a team to best sequence the content of the course and establish pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning?
8. How do you work as a team to identify prerequisites knowledge and skills students need to master the essential learning of each unit of instruction?
9. How do you identify strategies and create instruments to assess whether students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills?
10. How do you develop strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking them?
11. How do you develop frequent common formative assessments that help determine each student's mastery of essential learning?
12. How do you establish the proficiency standard you want each student to achieve on each skill and concept examined with your common assessment?

13. How do you use the results of your common assessments to assist each other?
14. How do you use the results of your common assessments to identify students who need additional time and that support?
15. How do you work as a team to ensure they receive that support?
16. How do you agree on the criteria you use in judging the quality of students work and stick to those criteria?
17. How do you develop or utilize common summative assessment to help assess the strength and weaknesses of your program?
18. How do you evaluate your adherence to team norms and effectiveness and how often do you evaluate?

APPENDIX F2

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR TEAM CONSIDERATION

(18 questions condensed in 9 for easy interview)

Adapted from Learning by Doing (DuFour et al., 2016, pp. 69-70)

1. How did you identify norms and protocols to guide you in working as a team?
2. How did you establish your PLC goals to improve on this level of achievement you are working interdependently to attain?
3. Can you eliminate course content and topics to devote more time to the essential curriculum? How do you do that?
4. How do you work as a team to best sequence the content of the course and establish pacing guides to help students achieve the intended essential learning?
5. How do you develop strategies and systems to assist students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge and skills when they are lacking them?
6. How do you develop frequent common formative assessments that help determine each student's mastery of essential learning?
7. How do you work as a team to ensure they receive that support?
8. How do you develop or utilize common summative assessment to help assess the strength and weaknesses of your program?
9. How do you evaluate your adherence to team norms and effectiveness and how often do you evaluate?

Follow up

Thank you for sharing your interesting experiences. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Are there other persons whom you would recommend I speak to, or documents that you can provide that would give me more information about PLCS or provide me more information about PLC processes?

May I contact you if I have any follow-up questions? What is the best way to do so?

If you remember anything you would like to add, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you again.

APPENDIX G

QUESTIONNAIRE: PROGRAM DESIGN

Please provide to the best of your knowledge all information about the types of meetings that were mentioned during the interview. (it is totally fine not to have all information. So, spaces can be left empty)

Types of meetings	ABC Meetings	Coaching days	Local PLCs meetings	Training days	District-wide PLC	Other (specif
1. Goals						
2. Scheduling						
3. Facilitator						
4, Duration						
5. Activities						
6. Types of teams						
7. Who is Involved? (list Ex: Superintendent)						
8. Is it assigned by administration? *(Tick what applies and explain)*	□Always □Sometimes □Never ……..	□Always □Sometimes □Never ……..	□Always □Sometimes □Never ……..	□Always □Sometimes □Never ……	□Always □Sometimes □Never…… ……..	□Always □Sometimes □Never ……
9. How are activities Planned?						
10.Implementation of activities						
11. Is a report required? (explain)						
12. Is there a formal assessment tool ? (cite)						
13. Is there a formal assessment session?						
14. What is next step after assessment?						

APPENDIX H

SCRIPT

Interview / Focus group # ……

Date …….

Welcome and thank you for your participation. My name is Helene Diack and I am a Ph.D. student at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale conducting my Dissertation research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D. in Education. Thank you for accepting to participate in my study. This interview will take about 60 minutes and will include 9 questions regarding your experiences and how the PLC process has influenced your work as an educator in terms of collaboration. I would like your permission again to tape record this interview, so as to document accurately the information you are willing to share. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All of your responses are confidential and will be used to develop a better understanding of how you and your peers view and feel about the PLC collaborative culture in your district and what might influence it. The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the collaborative culture of the PLC.

I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. You and I the investigator have both signed and dated each copy certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive one copy and I will keep the other under lock and key, separate from your reported responses. Your participation in this interview is totally voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

APPENDIX I-1

DEMOGRAPHICS FOR TEAM LEADERS / ADMINISTRATORS

Gender: F ❑ M ❑ Age (optional) _____

1. How many years have you worked in this PLC process? (Check response):

   1 year or less ❑ 2 years ❑ 3 -5 years ❑ More than 5 years ❑ (specify): _____

2. Before leading this PLC/District had you been teaching? # of years _____

3. Thinking about your satisfaction in the program, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being low and 5 being high, how would you rate your <u>current</u> satisfaction? (circle):

   1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX I- 2

DEMOGRAPHICS FOR TEAM MEMBERS

1. Gender: F ❑ M ❑ Age (optional) _____

2. How many years have you been in this PLC? (Check response):

   1 year or less ❑ 2 years ❑ 3 - 5 years ❑ More than 5 years ❑ (specify): _____

3. Before enrolling in this PLC, how many years had you been teaching? _____years

4. Thinking about your satisfaction in the program, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being low and 5 being high, how would you rate your <u>current</u> satisfaction? (circle):

   1 2 3 4 5

VITA

Graduate School

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Université Cheikh Anta Diop
Licence Civilization & American Literature, 1987

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Association of Teacher Educators Clinical Fellow Atlanta, 2019

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Association of Teachers of English Certificate of Appreciation, 2011

Dissertation Title:

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Major Professor: Dr. John McIntyre